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HEROD *and* MARIAMNE

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(FRIEDRICH HEBBEL'S)

HEROD *and* MARIAMNE

A FREE ADAPTATION

BY

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ACT I

SCENE I

The curtain rises on KING HEROD's palace in Jerusalem. The morning light streams in through the window of the KING's own apartments. The whole court is present, a silent, furtive, oriental court, nobles conferring in undertones and moving on tiptoe. Prominent in the crowd is JOSEPH, HEROD's brother-in-law, who stands whispering to JUDAH, a Jewish commander. Near the door stands SERUBABEL, a weather-beaten Galilean countryman, pointing out the notables to his son PHILO, a youngster of eighteen. It is noticeable that two men stand isolated, speaking to none. One is TITUS, a Roman commander, who in race and type is so remote that his indifference is as comprehensible as it is genuine. The other is LAMECH, a fanatical elderly Pharisee, who watches the behaviour of the crowd with fierce contempt.

The centre of the attention, the subject of the whispers, the reason for the hushed and furtive movements, HEROD himself, lies asleep on a couch in the centre of the room. But his slumber is light and troubled. Finally he wakes with a start. At once the court stirs into activity. The courtiers draw near, a slave adjusts his pillows, others bring towels and a basin of water that he may wash the sleep from his eyes. This he does, all the while glancing about the room as if still lost in dreams. His eyes light on three men who stand a little apart, guarded by soldiers. The men are young, bronzed, half-naked, with chains on their wrists. Each holds some small parcel, cupped in his two hands as if it were precious. HEROD crooks his finger at them. All three rush forward and fall on their knees.

THE FIRST PRISONER:

Three black pearls!

THE SECOND PRISONER:

Six white ones, each as big as an orange flower-bud!

THE THIRD PRISONER:

My lord, my lord, here's a pink pearl, pear-shaped, the finest ever found in the fisheries!

As each speaks his parcel is taken from him by the secretary, who pours the pearls into one shallow vessel and presents it to HEROD.

HEROD: Strike off their chains! Give each man a piece of money and let him go!

He pours the pearls in a cascade in his hand. The men, overjoyed, are hustled away by the soldiers. Meanwhile JOAB, a travel-stained messenger, pushes his way through the crowd and salutes.

JOAB: *(with precision)*
Beg to report my return.

HEROD: *(vaguely)* Later.
He turns again to the secretary.

Have the white pearls from Baghdad been re-strung?

THE SECRETARY:

Two days ago—also fifty, without flaw, from Taprobane.

HEROD: Bring them!

The SECRETARY signals to a slave. Meanwhile JOAB shows plainly his surprise and indignation at being disregarded.

JOAB: *(significantly)* I saw Antony.

HEROD: *(his eyes still searching the room)* Later.

He sees JUDAH and beckons.

Have they put out the fire?

JUDAH: *(amazed)* You know about it already?

HEROD: It broke out at midnight. I was the first to see it, and called the guard. Why, my good Judah, I woke you.

JUDAH: *(reporting formally)* The fire has been put out.

At this moment, the SLAVE returns, holding an

open casket. He presents it to HEROD who lifts from it a magnificent string of pearls. JUDAH, thinking that his interview is over, turns away muttering to his neighbour.

JUDAH: So it is true that he sneaks about the lanes at night in disguise. Well—so long as we're warned!

HEROD: *(raising his voice)* Judah!

JUDAH: *(hurriedly turning back)* Sir?

HEROD: *(still letting the pearls run through his fingers)* There was a woman. I saw her in a window, sitting on her bed, her face lit by the flames. She looked dazed. Did you save her?

JUDAH: She wouldn't let us.

HEROD: Would not let you?

JUDAH: She fought us tooth and nail, clinging to the bed, screaming out that she had planned to kill herself, but Death's own plan was better.

HEROD: Crazy?

JUDAH: Her husband had just died. His body lay beside her, still warm. Yes, grief is crazy.

HEROD puts back one of the strings of pearls in the casket.

HEROD: Take these to Queen Mariamne!

The SLAVE gathers up the casket and hurries away. HEROD turns to JUDAH.

Let the dead woman be buried like a queen! See to it!

He speaks loudly. The whole court hears the order and instantly LAMECH, the Pharisee, steps forward.

LAMECH: Bury a suicide in Jerusalem? Never!

HEROD leans forward and peers at him.

HEROD: Lamech? Is it Lamech? Once you led a hunt against me, Lamech. I forgave you and forgot you. Stay forgotten!

LAMECH: Forgotten so long as I hold my tongue! But I defied you before the Sanhedrim—

HEROD: (*slyly*) I thought it was I who did the defying.

LAMECH: —and I speak now as I spoke then, for the Law. (*arrogantly*) The Law speaks to the King.

HEROD: (*warning him*) The Law should fear the King.

LAMECH: So it does—(*with malice*)—since the death of Aristobulus the High Priest.

There is a stir among the courtiers, but

HEROD *is unmoved.*

HEROD: (*coldly*) Say what you have to say!

LAMECH: I say—since the woman could have saved herself and did not, she died an outcast and must be buried as one.

HEROD: (*bored*) Is that all? Save your breath!

He turns away, and this time his eye lights on

SERUBABEL. *Instantly and with a smile he displays his royal memory for faces.*

A Galilean! And the—name—is—Serubabel. Right?

SERUBABEL: (*beaming*) So the King remembers my ugly face after all these years?

HEROD: (*with charm*) “All these years” are your fault, not mine.

He turns to the courtiers.

Sirs, I present to you a hunter of foxes, lions and—men. In Galilee, once upon a time, he and I cleared the hills of all three—eh, old hunter?

He notices PHILO.

But who’s this? Your son? What’s his name?

SERUBABEL: Philo, Sir. Your man, as I am. Make a soldier of him! Will you?

HEROD: I will. You Galileans always bring me luck. Titus?

On which SERUBABEL retires, beaming, and is at once surrounded and congratulated, while

TITUS steps forward and gives the Roman salute. But before he can speak a SERVANT in the doorway steps forward.

THE SERVANT: (*loudly*) The Princess Selima desires to speak with——

SELIMA enters. She is a pretty, fretful, impulsive creature not inclined to stand upon ceremony.

SELIMA: Herod—dear brother—I should not be here——

HEROD: (*grimly*) You should not.

He turns to JOSEPH.

Joseph—can't you keep your wife in her own quarters?

SELIMA: (*unabashed*) But our mother—she heard that you were seen at the fire and took fright. Can you not come to her—old as she is—ill as she is——?

HEROD: Presently.

SELIMA: We sent to Mariamne——

HEROD: (*grimly*) Why?

SELIMA: (*sharply*) Your own wife should know best where you are to be found.

HEROD: You think so? Joseph!

He implies: "Take her away!" Then continues speaking to SELIMA:

I will visit her presently. (*sternly*) But do not come here again unsummoned!

JOSEPH takes out SELIMA.

And now, Titus!

TITUS: Sir, it is my duty to tell you that I have discovered a piece of trickery.

HEROD: Ah, your Roman accent, Titus! We Jews pronounce it "treachery."

He turns to the alarmed, whispering courtiers.

You may go.

The courtiers gracefully accept dismissal and

begin to melt away, JOAB among them. HEROD sees this, and with a beckoning finger stops him.
(to JOAB) Wait!

He turns back to TITUS.

Now, Titus!

TITUS: The mute who stood sentinel at your door last night——

HEROD: Alexandra, my wife's mother, brought him to my notice—yes?

TITUS: Well, he's found his voice.

HEROD: Explain yourself.

TITUS: He slept on duty. The centurion who shared the watch didn't wake him because he's not in the service. But he thought he might lose his balance and the clatter of his fall would wake you—it was early, you were still asleep—so he kept an eye on him. Well, all of a sudden this mute begins to talk in his sleep, muttering and calling down curses on—Herod!

HEROD: On Herod!

A pause.

Your man is certain of his facts?

TITUS: Certain.

HEROD: And you're certain of him?

TITUS: Certain.

HEROD: Good! To know the worst is good. Thanks, Titus.

He pauses, then delivers sentence.

The boy Philo is to take the mute's place. Arrange it!

There is a longer pause:

The mute is to be executed at once. And if he asks why, say: "Because you are capable of asking."

TITUS salutes and turns to go.

Wait!

TITUS *pauses*.

Oblige me by sending one of your own men to Alexandra, the Queen's mother. He is to bring her to me here, at once.

TITUS *salutes and goes out*. HEROD *watches him go*.

So that's how we stand! Traitors in my own house—open defiance from the Pharisees—and I can't punish the fools without making martyrs of them. God, how I hate fools! My Galileans—oh well, I'm useful to them, and I'd be an awkward enemy, so they contrive to love me a little, or so they say.

He stares at JOAB.

That fellow brings bad news—bursting to tell it too. He's another that loves me—a little!

He beckons, and as JOAB approaches he addresses him cheerfully.

Well, Joab? What's the news from Alexandria?

JOAB: I told you, already! Antony received me.

HEROD: Did he indeed? And since when do my ambassadors find it necessary to report that they are received?

JOAB: I only know—I had the greatest difficulty in seeing him.

HEROD: Oh, if you chose the wrong moment——

JOAB: Wrong moment! There are only twenty-four hours in the day. In each one the door was slammed in my face.

HEROD: No tact, my poor Joab! No tact!

JOAB: Tact? It was a deliberately planned insult. And when I did get admittance at last I found myself in a madhouse. There was Antony, sprawling among his hangers-on, appointing magistrates, consulting priests, receiving embassies, transacting state affairs, and all the while roaring drunk.

- HEROD: Then why say that your reception was a deliberate insult? You know what he is.
- JOAB: Because when my turn came, and I handed him your letter he wouldn't open it.
- HEROD: What's that?
- JOAB: Instead he had a portrait brought to him. I was to tell him if it was a good likeness.
- HEROD: Likeness of——?
- JOAB: (*maliciously*) Aristobulus.
- HEROD: Ha!
- JOAB: Says Antony to me: "They say it is Herod's young brother-in-law, whom he made High Priest at seventeen—you Jews, you keep it in the family!—and who soon after most obligingly drowned himself."
- HEROD: Who sent that portrait to him?
- JOAB: The Queen's mother.
- HEROD: You again, Alexandra!
- JOAB: He must have had it by him some time. But he looked at it as though he'd never seen it before—fascinated.
- HEROD: Fascinated! Well, what did you do?
- JOAB: What could I do? I held my tongue. Antony cocked his eye at me. Still I held my tongue. Then he said: "More light, that's what we need!" caught up your letter, lit it at the nearest torch, held it before the picture, and let it burn—a flame—a flicker—ashes!
- HEROD: Bold, even for him! But he was drunk.
- JOAB: I was so angry that I called out: "What do you mean? You haven't even read it?" Then he thrust his gross, handsome face into mine and he squares his chin and he says: "I want Herod: that's what I mean. He's impeached by his own people." Then, of course, I described just how the accident happened, how your brother-in-

law was bathing, how he had a sudden rush of blood to the head—— But Antony cried out: “A rush of fists to the head!” And then I realised——

He hesitates.

HEROD: Go on!

JOAB: Well, if you'll forgive plain speaking——

HEROD: Go on!

JOAB: Nobody in Rome believes that it was an accident. They think that you had him knocked on the head and flung into the river.

HEROD: (*softly*) How much I owe you, Alexandra!

JOAB: Then he dismissed me. But as I was, well, frankly—scuttling—out of danger, he shouted after me: “Wait, you! You never answered my question. Is it a good likeness?” I—I assented. What else could I do? And then he asked me——

Once more he hesitates.

HEROD: Well?

JOAB: Well, I hardly——

HEROD: Tell me what he asked! Tell me *all* he asked!

JOAB: He asked: “Does Mariamne resemble this lovely, young, dead brother of hers? Is she so exquisite that all the women hate her?”

There is a long pause.

HEROD: (*at last*) And you said——?

He plays with the pearls.

JOAB: (*terrified*) I said that I knew nothing about it: that I had never seen our Queen unveiled. And that's the truth.

His story ended he draws a deep breath of relief.

A SOLDIER: (*entering*) Alexandra, the Queen's mother——

HEROD: (*impassively*) Let her come in!

He turns to JOAB.

You will return to Egypt with me. In the meantime you won't leave the palace.

JOAB: (*propitiating him*) I won't speak to a soul while I'm in it, either.

HEROD: No, I daresay you won't. Who enjoys hanging on a cross, dying inch by inch, just as the almonds are coming into blossom?

ALEXANDRA *enters dressed in deepest mourning. She is a handsome, elderly woman, with poise and power. She is supple, quick, dangerous. She bows to HEROD with exaggerated submission.*

ALEXANDRA: My dear son——

HEROD: In law! In law! My mother in nature——

ALEXANDRA: (*suavely*) —lies ill! I know! I sent my sympathy only an hour ago to your sister Selima, but it was received—as ever!

She shrugs.

HEROD: I will reprove my sister Selima. Let her anxieties excuse her, especially as you yourself——

He smiles.

——have added to them.

ALEXANDRA: (*warily*) I? Impossible.

HEROD: (*lightly*) Oh yes. Through your friendship with Queen Cleopatra.

He watches her.

Her Antony has sent for me.

ALEXANDRA's *face, in spite of herself, lights up for an instant. She quickly controls it.*

ALEXANDRA: I shall regret your absence. But surely the journey can cause none who loves you to lie awake and anxious at night. You have cleared the hills of dangerous men.

HEROD: The hills, the valleys, and the deserts. But not Antony's court. Therefore I must have about me only those whom I can trust. You, I think, could recommend such a man to me.

ALEXANDRA: I? I am served by women.

HEROD: Yet you supplied me already with one faithful—mute.

ALEXANDRA: (*as if recollecting*) Ah yes. (*sweetly*) I have always found that such unfortunates are faithful.

HEROD: (*as sweetly*) Your man was indeed fortunate, and no doubt faithful—to his employer. And certainly mute. Was he not?

ALEXANDRA: Was? He is.

HEROD: Oh yes, now that he has joined his fellows.

ALEXANDRA: You have sent him back to me?

HEROD: To the dead—to the dead. He is deaf now, mute now. It will be hard to fill your letters now—letters to Cleopatra—with my secrets.

ALEXANDRA: I make formal protest——

HEROD: But I, you see, protest informally. Farewell mother—by law. I leave you to visit my own mother who loves me as you—I think—loved your son, lost Aristobulus—. This I remember. And I remember that he is dead. Also I remember that you are my wife's mother as well as my enemy. And so once more—but for the last time, Alexandra—you escape your punishment.

He goes out, leaving ALEXANDRA looking after him.

ALEXANDRA: (*muttering*) “Then Jael, Heber's wife, took a nail of the tent, and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly to him where he lay upon the ground; and smote the nail into his temples and fastened it into the ground; for he was fast asleep and weary. So he died.”

Voices are heard in the distance from servants stationed at intervals all down the long corridors. The cry is flung from one to another, always getting louder and clearer.

VOICES: The Queen, make way!
 Make way—the Queen!
 The Queen—make way!

While the voices are thus echoing three or four women attendants hurry into the room, make their obeisance to ALEXANDRA, then swiftly prepare for the QUEEN's coming. HEROD's couch is straightened, curtains are readjusted, etc. ALEXANDRA watches these preparations sardonically. A SERVANT appears, announcing formally:

THE SERVANT: The Queen Mariamne visits King Herod!

He steps back.

The Queen!

MARIAMNE enters, veiled. *She is magnificently dressed and wears ropes of pearls. She makes a gesture of dismissal to the SERVANT, who goes, closing the door behind him.*

MARIAMNE puts up a hand with which to unveil herself, on which the women come running and relieve her of it. They lay it on the couch, then stand near it, awaiting further orders.

At MARIAMNE's entrance ALEXANDRA has made a deep, formal obeisance. Now the two women look long at each other, ALEXANDRA fixing her eyes on MARIAMNE, MARIAMNE enduring her gaze at first gravely, then with the glimmer of an ironic smile. At last she says, with an intonation soft, courteous, but with the same hint of irony:

MARIAMNE: Mother?

ALEXANDRA: *(flinging back the tone)* Daughter?
 Then, with malicious intention.

Is it my daughter?

MARIAMNE: How do you wish me to answer that?

ALEXANDRA: I have not been permitted to see my daughter

Mariamne for three months. But when I last saw her she wore mourning.

MARIAMNE: Now, as you see, I have put off my mourning.
She goes slowly across to HEROD's couch and seats herself.

ALEXANDRA: (*following her*) Mourning for her brother's death.

MARIAMNE *gives her a look, then signs to the attendants who go out by a lesser door.*

(*attacking*) You send them away because you're afraid of what I may say to you.

MARIAMNE: (*restlessly*) Mother, mother!

She rises and turns away. Her eyes search the room as if she were looking for someone to protect her.

ALEXANDRA: (*still attacking*) That is why you held aloof from me ever since the boy's death.

MARIAMNE: (*passionately, turning upon ALEXANDRA*) That is not why. It is because you mourn too fiercely, Mother, and—and for yourself, not for him. I wanted to remember him as he stood there, myself in a mirror. "Sister, I'm to race Joseph and all of them. I wish you could see!" Talk—laughter! "Good-bye, dear boy! Don't swim too far!" Then—death!

Her voice fails.

ALEXANDRA: (*contemptuously*) You grieve! I act. "An eye for an eye——"

MARIAMNE: (*too quickly*) Can you punish a stream of water? (*wearily*) Why do you torment us both? We can't bring the dead to life again.

ALEXANDRA: We can pay their debts. (*slyly*) You could, easily. You have but to fold your hands and let the light die from your eyes to look so like the painted corpse of Aristobulus that Herod would——

MARIAMNE: (*wary and fierce*) You speak of my husband.

ALEXANDRA: (*equally fierce*) I speak of your husband.

There is a breathless pause, then ALEXANDRA returns to the attack.

I say that you look so like your murdered brother that your husband should shudder and divorce himself from you.

MARIAMNE: He does not shudder—nor will I.

ALEXANDRA: Then I've no more to say.

There is another pause. MARIAMNE turns restlessly towards the window as though needing air.

ALEXANDRA watches her, and speaks at last with forced tenderness.

(*using her charm*) My darling, is it that you still doubt his guilt?

She comes nearer.

Dearest—I could give you proofs.

MARIAMNE: I don't need proofs, Mother.

ALEXANDRA is, on this, about to burst into a denunciation.

ALEXANDRA: Then——!

She checks herself.

But why should I curse you? You are cursed already: tried and condemned by your guilty passion for this guilty man——

MARIAMNE: —whom you chose for my husband. I had no say in it.

ALEXANDRA: My father made the match.

MARIAMNE: Against your will?

ALEXANDRA: Not altogether. We needed an ally. If Antony had been within reach I'd have said no. But as it was—I acquiesced.

MARIAMNE: Then why revile me?

ALEXANDRA: Because you cheated my hope.

MARIAMNE: Ah, you hoped that I should sell him my kindness. For every touch, for every kindness, I was

to ask for the head of someone whom you hated. And then, when no other enemies were left, I was to be Jael the cunning—and strike him down in his sleep. Then you'd have been proud of me.

ALEXANDRA: Prouder than I am now—though you are hung with pearls.

MARIAMNE: Pearls?

ALEXANDRA: What is the price of pearls to-day? Don't ask the Maccabee! Ask the market-woman, Herod's wife!

MARIAMNE: Wife, Mother! True wife of the man to whom you gave me. He forgets his rank with me. I can well forget my race with him.

ALEXANDRA: Yet three months ago, when even I had the sense to be as dumb as one of my own mutes, you showed him that you remembered. When Aristobulus was drowned you shut your doors on me, but on Herod also. On Herod first of all——

MARIAMNE: If I did for one faithless moment turn against my king and husband, it was because I was half mad with grief!

ALEXANDRA: (*with a laugh*) Only *half* mad?

MARIAMNE ignores this insult. The charge has struck home, and it is to herself that she gives the explanation.

MARIAMNE: (*softly*) But he should not have come to me dressed in mourning.

ALEXANDRA: (*bitterly*) Yes! He ordered his mourning in advance.

MARIAMNE: (*still to herself*) He should have come to me in red, in blood-red. Then I'd have submitted.

ALEXANDRA: (*with a laugh*) Gladly.

MARIAMNE: (*turning on her*) You'll drive me into asking: "Why was the boy dangerous to Herod?"

ALEXANDRA: Herod knows.

MARIAMNE: Nevertheless *I* think that you could guess.

ALEXANDRA: Of what do you accuse me?

MARIAMNE: (*wearily*) I do not know. I only know that a ghost haunts the bed where my husband should be, and that its piteous youth so troubles me that I am silent when I ought to speak, and speak when I should be silent.

ALEXANDRA: You are Herod's wife; that is your punishment.

MARIAMNE: I am Herod's love, and we have been three months parted. That is my punishment.

HEROD *re-enters hurriedly, in talk with a*
COURTIER.

HEROD: Mariamne!

In fierce aside to the COURTIER.

Go! Go!

The COURTIER *hurries out.*

Mariamne!

The two stand looking at each other as if no one else existed.

I was about to come to you once more, but you have come to me—you have come to me.

He holds out his arms.

Mariamne!

As if in spite of herself MARIAMNE *takes a half-step towards him.*

Closer!

She takes another half-step towards him.

When did you touch me last?

She stands rigid. HEROD in turn takes a step towards her. There is now only a little space between them.

Mariamne!

Suddenly they are in each other's arms.

ALEXANDRA: I will not see it! I will not see it!

She covers her face with her veil and hurries

out. Her going is unnoticed by HEROD and MARIAMNE, who are absorbed in each other. He draws her to the couch. They sit together, still clinging to each other.

HEROD: I came to you often. I was always denied.

MARIAMNE: I know.

HEROD: I was about to come again.

MARIAMNE: I knew it.

HEROD: Refuse me twenty times, I'd still come——

MARIAMNE: That also I knew. In this triple month of nights—there were no dawns, no moons, no sunsets in this month—in this stretched time of abstinence from you, I had that knowledge for my sole comfort: "Refuse him twenty times—still he'll come."

HEROD: To be barred out!

MARIAMNE: I did not bar you out. My race, faith, remembered childhood, my mother's hate of you, my own half guess—all these abjured you. And so this——

She strikes her mouth fiercely with her hand.

—this hungry mouth gave its false orders to my slaves to lock the doors. But my soul sped to the doors ahead of them crying: "Come in!" You should have known.

HEROD: I waited.

MARIAMNE: You should have forced your way to me in all your anger. I am your wife.

HEROD: Because you were, I waited.

MARIAMNE: You should not. A king should not. Ah, Herod——

He begins to take her in his arms. She makes a last half protest.

HEROD: *(over-ruling it)* I hold you again. All is well. I remember nothing.

Their embrace is long. Then, with his arms still round her, HEROD lifts his head.

HEROD: Look at me, Mariamne!

She obeys.

Unchanged!

MARIAMNE: Unchanged!

HEROD: (*kindling*) Were you afraid, too? Yes, it's a lifetime since I kissed you, and faces change in less than a lifetime. But you and your image are still one.

MARIAMNE: (*with apprehension*) My image?

HEROD: Why, when a man goes about his day—war or peace—judgment seat or far journey, he carries with him—here—here—here——

He touches his eyes, his forehead and his breast in turn.

—the image of his love. But often when he returns the two no longer match. But you are more lovely than my image of you.

He continues to devour her, putting her a little from him so that he may see her the more clearly. Suddenly his face lightens to gaiety.

And you wear my pearls. And I have more for you.

He reaches out for the second string lying on the head of the couch.

Here's a pink pearl, pear-shaped, the finest ever taken in the fisheries. It cost three lives.

MARIAMNE: I will not have it.

She strikes it from his hand, but her passion does not anger HEROD.

HEROD: Is it the colour? Here are whiter ones.

He draws her down to him and wreathes a string about her wrist. But lying in his arms, allowing his caresses, she continues:

MARIAMNE: (*feverishly*) Always more pearls for me. Why?

HEROD: They are pure—flawless—your image.

MARIAMNE: They tell me that when the divers weary you throw open the prisons. You bribe the condemned, crying: "A life for one more pearl!" Why?

HEROD: (*with an uneasy laugh*) I trade even with castaways.

MARIAMNE: (*playing with the pearls*) Yes, they are flawless. But they trouble me. Ever since my brother's death—such a young brother, such an early death——

Her voice fails. HEROD, in sudden apprehension, takes her and turns her averted face towards him. She is weeping.

HEROD: Never before have I seen you weep.

MARIAMNE: He was dear to me.

HEROD: To you? The only one of us who was stern with him!

MARIAMNE: *Because he was so dear to me.*

HEROD's eyes drop. He says uneasily:

HEROD: This I did not know.

MARIAMNE: Or you would not have thought that pearls could comfort me.

HEROD: (*thickly*) They were tribute, not comfort.

MARIAMNE: Why, of course. You could never think, could you, of paying any real debt with them?

She watches him intently.

HEROD: (*coldly*) I see that you are tired of pearls.

MARIAMNE: Oh no, no! I am queen. Pearls and jewels are my right. And indeed they are flawless. If I refuse them it is because you have a sister——

HEROD: What has my sister Selima to do with your pearls?

MARIAMNE smiles.

Why do you smile?

MARIAMNE: Would you like to see me in my coffin, very

cunningly killed? Powdered glass—or a tile could drop from a roof so easily——

HEROD: (*harshly*) If you have anything to say against Selima——

MARIAMNE: I only say—no more pearls! Then she and I can still pretend to be friends. We were friends once, you know. When I nearly died last year she came to my bedside and kissed me. I thought—a half-dead thought—“That’s my reward for leaving this world.” But I cruelly betrayed her. I recovered.

HEROD: (*stubbornly*) She is my sister. I love her.

MARIAMNE: I can forgive that. But you hang *me* with your pearls. How can *she* forgive that? So, when I visit her, I do not drink the wine she offers me—even a cup of water I’d let stand. But then I can’t think of water as I used to do. Water! The thirsty plants long for it. It gives life to everyone. Yet this holy, healing water makes me shudder. It drowned my brother. *You* should hate water too.

HEROD: Why?

MARIAMNE: Water has slandered you, burdened you with its guilt.

Hysterically.

But I’ll give water the lie. For you couldn’t love the sister and kill the brother. That would be against nature.

HEROD: (*gently*) But suppose the brother were also plotting to kill and a man could only save himself by striking first? I say “suppose.” Take it further! Even if that brother were harmless, suppose he allowed himself to be used as a weapon by others? I only say “suppose.” Take it further. Suppose that this weapon, this human weapon, was threatening the life, not only of

one man but of a whole people, since the man was needed by his people, was their sole protection against an alien tyranny? Again, I only say "suppose." But in such a case I think that the sister would say: "I am not only a sister, I am the wife of my husband. I am the mother of my people. I am a queen, with the wisdom and bravery and the heart to say: 'The King does as he must. I will not judge.' "

He takes her hand.

Not every Jewish woman could say it. Ruth in her cornfields—no. But Jael? Yes! Queen Esther? Yes! Judith would kindle to me. What do you say to me, daughter of the Maccabees? You kissed me an hour ago, remembering nothing. Now, remembering everything, will you kiss me, Mariamne?

He takes her in his arms and kisses her.

Again!

He releases her.

That was a kiss of farewell—maybe the last.

MARIAMNE:

(startled) The last farewell?

HEROD:

Antony has sent for me. Whether he'll send me back or not I don't know. It depends——

MARIAMNE:

On what? On what?

HEROD:

—on how much influence your mother has.

She tries to speak, but he overrules her.

Well, I shall know soon enough. But one thing I must know now. Mariamne, am I to defend myself?

MARIAMNE:

Why do you ask?

HEROD:

Oh, Mariamne, don't play with me! I'm under your spell and you know it. How can I fight my battle unless I'm sure of you. Tell me that and I'll tell you whether Antony welcomes me with open arms or flings me into a dungeon.

You don't say a word? I show you my heart and still you don't say a word.

A pause.

Say something, Mariamne! Ah, you despise me because you think I don't know my own weakness. But I do know it. I know that a king has no human rights. God is the king's sole confidant, or should be. But I am not such a king.

A pause.

Still no word?

A pause.

I'll tell you something. Last year, when I thought you were dying, I had planned to die too. I couldn't have survived you. And now I'll tell you another thing. If I were dying—now—I could bring myself to learn from Selima. I could give you poison with my own hands.

MARIAMNE: And then you would recover.

HEROD: Oh no, no. For I'd have shared the cup with you, just to make sure—just to make sure. Tell me, could you forgive such a proof of love?

MARIAMNE: Never! With my last cheated breath I'd execrate you. And all the more because—

She stops herself.

HEROD: Last night a woman burned to death. They could have saved her; but she would not be torn away from her dead husband's arms. You despise her, don't you?

MARIAMNE: Why do you think I should? She wasn't forced, she was free. She chose death. She preferred it to living. Can't you see the difference?

HEROD: If it happened to us?

MARIAMNE: Herod, Herod, you should have made yourself dearer to me than the whole world. You should

know it if you have. And if you have, what's left when once you're gone?

HEROD: The whole world! There are greater kings than Herod in it, and you are very lovely, Mariamne. There's not a king but would put aside his wife if you lifted a finger. You are so lovely, Mariamne, that you give men immortality; for the mind in which your image lives can never die. You are so lovely that——

He catches his breath, then hurries on faster and faster, like one possessed.

Think, Mariamne! Think, and be tempted! Think of dying in the sweet knowledge that you died for love. Think of knowing, as you pressed his dead lips, that you were already hurrying to join your lover in that dim Afterwards, where life's more tenuous than the thin air of space! There horror lies in wait! But we—we make it our last ecstasy! Oh Mariamne, give me your promise! I suffer, Mariamne. Mariamne, be merciful! Tell me what you will do when I go—helplessly go out of life—for ever?

Then, with a sudden abrupt change of manner:
Antony spoke of you.

But MARIAMNE ignores the last sentence and answers his earlier words.

MARIAMNE: What I shall do? Love doesn't ask such a question.

HEROD: Antony spoke of you.

MARIAMNE: There are no rules.

HEROD: Good-bye!

MARIAMNE: But I know you will come back. Only God can break you.

HEROD: So sure?

MARIAMNE: So sure!

HEROD: The surest tremble for those they love.

MARIAMNE: I do not.

HEROD: No—you do not.

MARIAMNE: Now it's my turn. Now *you* shall listen! If—because *he* died—you can no longer trust me—then God help me and God help you.

HEROD: One word would give me everything. But you won't say that word. You won't give that promise.

MARIAMNE: If I did, can you be sure I'd keep it? You can only trust me because you know me. Who answers for me? Only my own image in your heart. If you can't trust me, then what image of me, oh God, do you carry in your heart? But let's end this! Go, Herod, go! You have altered. You are still altering. But I can't change myself—at least not yet.

She hurries out. HEROD stands looking after her.

HEROD: Not yet! Perhaps later, when I'm dead. Oh, she's not human!

He waits, watching the door.

Once when we quarrelled she came back.

A pause.

She had only to drop her handkerchief! She comes back to fetch it—saves her pride—But no! She'd rather let me go away unreconciled—good! If that's what she wants, good! But before I go—— Mariamne, you refused me your promise! Hear mine! You shall live in the shadow of death. If Antony destroys me for your sake, Antony shall find himself cheated. That's settled. But who'll obey my orders once I'm dead? Let me think! Mariamne—Selima! Selima—Joseph! Yes, that's the way.

He touches a bell. A SERVANT enters.

Send for my brother-in-law!

THE SERVANT: He's already waiting to see you.

HEROD: Send him in!

He sits waiting. JOSEPH enters. He is handsome, alert, facile.

Well, Joseph?

JOSEPH: I've heard the news. I came to wish you a good journey and a quick return.

HEROD: There may not be one.

JOSEPH: Not——? I don't understand you.

HEROD: How strange! You understand me so well as a rule.

JOSEPH: I've never known you lose courage before.

HEROD: I've not lost courage, only hope.

JOSEPH: (*in a panic*) But if anything happens to you—what will happen to us?

HEROD: (*smiling*) Better the devil we know, eh, Joseph?

JOSEPH: Why do you take that tone to me. Haven't I guarded your interests?

HEROD: I am sure Alexandra thinks so. When she and Aristobulus were escaping, packed away in a coffin, who found it out? Joseph! Who had the boat stopped in harbour? Joseph! Who wrecked that and a dozen other little plans? Joseph!

JOSEPH: (*terrified*) Yes, yes! You see how I'm placed if——

HEROD: —if anything happened to me. If you hadn't been so useful, my Joseph, you'd have nothing to fear. As it is, when Alexandra's daughter, my widow, ascends the throne—if she ascends the throne——

JOSEPH: What do you mean?

HEROD: Someone must ascend the throne! Mariamne—or another.

JOSEPH: You mean my wife?

HEROD: I mean, I mean——! My good Joseph, my useful Joseph, I mean this: When we were reckoning up all the reasons Alexandra has to

be grateful to you we forget the main. You went bathing with Aristobulus——

JOSEPH: It's no secret. I did.

HEROD: And you wrestled with him.

JOSEPH: Earlier—yes.

HEROD: There you are.

JOSEPH: But I was half across the river when it all happened. I couldn't have got back to save him *or* drown him. You know what the current is.

HEROD: That's what everyone says. But as, by an unlucky chance, you were not only of the party, but did actually wrestle with him——

JOSEPH: What's behind all this?

HEROD: We stand accused, my Joseph!

JOSEPH: You, yes! But I——

HEROD: You are not only my brother-in-law, you are my intimate friend.

JOSEPH: I should hope so.

HEROD: Hope? Well, hope that you're not beheaded for a murder you never committed.

JOSEPH: Beheaded?

HEROD: That's your fate if I never return and if Mariamne——

JOSEPH: But I'm innocent.

HEROD: Appearances are against you. But I'll give you your chance—not, Joseph, because you're my friend, but because, in the way of kingship, you're my enemy.

Oh, not my personal enemy, Joseph. If you didn't want the crown you'd like me. You admire me as it is! You even model yourself on me. I've been amused at my pupil's aptness. The moodiness, the cunning, the blandness—you imitate it all quite skilfully. It impresses—Selima!

JOSEPH: I won't take that.

HEROD: Oh, yes, you will, my pupil. You'll take anything I give you. You always have. And now I'll give you something worth taking—crown, sword, mantle, sceptre! Take them—Viceroy! And give them up again to me and no one else!

JOSEPH: Do you mean this?

HEROD: I do, and I'll prove it. If I die the throne's yours—on one condition. If you want to follow me as King Joseph, then, when you hear of my death, kill Mariamne!

JOSEPH: Mariamne!

HEROD: (*swiftly*) Since Aristobulus is out of the way she's the natural pretender to the throne. You see that, don't you? And if the people have to choose between a mere brother-in-law and the last of the Maccabees—

JOSEPH: But—you can't order the death of your own wife!

HEROD: Can I not? I'll be honest with you, Joseph. My advice is good. It will make your fortune, that's obvious. But I don't pretend that it's just for love of you that I—clear the path. No, not though my sister Selima loves you, and I love her, as much—who knows—as Mariamne loved that boy I drowned. Love! How easy life would be without it, how orderly, how sane! Love is the eternal wrecker. To love is to be eaten of worms. I'd sooner face Antony's subtlest tormentors than—well, we love as we can—your way—my way—Antony's! But she shall not know Antony's way of love!

His tone changes.

And so you understand what you have to do.

JOSEPH: But——

HEROD: That is, unless——!

He pauses. Softly.

She—almost—let me think she'd follow me!
Husband and wife—she owes me her despair!
Debts must be paid. If a debtor defaults I
send my agent to collect. Isn't that legal—
logical?

JOSEPH: It's logical.

HEROD: Give her time, reasonable time. After that, if
she has not made an end—strike. And after
that, sit here——!

He points to the throne.

—and enjoy your glory as I've enjoyed my glory!
God save King Joseph! He could not save King
Herod.

His mood changes.

I'll tell Antony that you have never failed me,
and Mariamne's death shall be his proof. The
people were ready to rise against Rome. You
quieted them by her—elimination. That's your
public explanation—a last lesson in statecraft,
my Joseph. And so good-bye!

JOSEPH: You'll come back. You've always come back
in triumph.

HEROD: Oh yes, it's possible. And therefore——

He sits down, writes and seals a letter.

(holding it out) Here!

JOSEPH *takes it.*

Read the address!

JOSEPH: To the executioner.

HEROD: If, when I return, I find that would-be King
Joseph has—chattered; then the orders given
in that letter will be carried out. Take charge
of it as a reminder.

ACT I

HEROD AND MARIAMNE

JOSEPH:

If I open my mouth to a living soul I will deliver it to the executioner myself.

He goes out.

HEROD:

(*alone*) Now she is safe from Antony. Now one sword strikes us both. Now I can go.

THE CURTAIN FALLS

ACT I

SCENE II

The curtain rises, three months later, on the principal room in the apartment of ALEXANDRA, the Queen's mother. The room contains a main doorway leading out into the corridor, a staircase leading to an upper gallery, and windows, and a big pillared window leading on to a balcony, beyond which is a magnificent view.

At the moment all the windows are curtained and the door is shut, for a Memorial Service is being held, ALEXANDRA, the only mourner, is seated. Beside her crouch her three deaf-mutes, one male, two female, dwarfish creatures who converse with each other by signs and watch ALEXANDRA with the bright-eyed devotion of lap dogs. Four women and four men of ALEXANDRA's household are also in attendance. The service is being conducted by LAMECH, the Pharisee.

The last words are spoken and a pause follows. Then ALEXANDRA, with a gesture, signals to the men of the household to retire while she speaks with LAMECH.

ALEXANDRA: I'll hold this service for him every year. I thank you for coming.

LAMECH: No need. He was the High Priest. He was the last of the Maccabees. He was also the boy Aristobulus, whom I—schoolmastered!

ALEXANDRA: He'd have been eighteen to-day.

LAMECH: The queen was not present. Is she ill?

ALEXANDRA: Forgetful. What's a mere brother? *Her* prayers are all for the safety of his murderer. Well, he'll need them.

LAMECH: (*quickly*) Is there fresh news?

ALEXANDRA: Of Herod? There may be. I am waiting for the perfume-seller.

She turns to the women servants, raising her voice.

Take away the mourning!

The servants remove the veil that covers her head and help her to rise. She points to the shuttered windows.

Open them! Let in life again!

They obey.

LAMECH: *(in a low voice)* There's not a house in Jerusalem, nor a farm in all the countryside without its malcontent. Surely the time has come?

ALEXANDRA: We must first know that Antony holds Herod. Wait for the perfume-seller.

A MANSERVANT enters.

What is it?

THE SERVANT: May the Viceroy Joseph enter?

ALEXANDRA: Joseph? What does he want with me?

THE SERVANT: He desires to be received by the Queen.

ALEXANDRA: My daughter's not with me. Tell him so!

Then, as the SERVANT is retiring.

Who else waits?

THE SERVANT: Rug-sellers from Persia have been waiting two days.

ALEXANDRA: Send them to my daughter. Let her spend one of Herod's provinces on a carpet; I'm not a king's spoiled wife.

THE SERVANT: People from your own village have brought presents of figs and flowers.

ALEXANDRA: *(her face softening)* Ah! Entertain them well! Anyone else?

THE SERVANT: Shop-keepers—hawkers—a boy with caged fire-flies——

ALEXANDRA: Has the perfume-seller returned?

THE SERVANT: I have not seen him.

ALEXANDRA: When he comes bring him here. The room reeks of mortality. Let him try if his perfumes can smother it!

The SERVANT bows and goes out. She turns to the women.

ALEXANDRA: Go, all of you!

She waits while they go, then turns, bright-eyed and fierce, to LAMECH.

Now—your report!

LAMECH gives a quick glance at the mutes.

LAMECH: In front of those?

ALEXANDRA: I can trust them.

She touches one of the mutes and makes a rapid sign with her hands. His face lights up. He nods and scuttles off to the window and adjusts the blinds.

Mutes. I breed them. I've sent them as gifts to neighbour courts these fifteen years. Sometimes I slip in one who is neither mute nor deaf.

She laughs.

LAMECH: They're like animals.

ALEXANDRA: (*shrugging*) I'm utterly alone here. I must have someone to whom I can speak my thoughts.

LAMECH: There's always God.

ALEXANDRA: A deaf-mute!

LAMECH: Blasphemy!

ALEXANDRA: I speak my mind, even to God.

LAMECH: We have been led captive into many lands, but in the end we spoil the Egyptians. God is not deaf, nor silent. He hardens Pharaoh's heart. Then come the plagues and the punishments till Pharaoh lets the people go. So it was, so it will ever be. Amen.

ALEXANDRA: Pharaoh hardened his heart because he did not know us. But I accuse God because He has set over us one who does know us and uses his knowledge to weaken us. Tell the people that! Our nation is a lake of clear water set high in the inviolate hills, but Herod desires to break

the dam, so that we flow out and mingle with all the muddy waters of the world. Tell the people that!

LAMECH: Can he deny the promise made to Abraham: "Thy seed shall inherit the earth."

ALEXANDRA: He says—tell the people—that it is only by sharing with the heathen, marrying our daughters to them, sending them our sons, that we shall inherit the earth.

LAMECH: Blasphemy!

ALEXANDRA: I've heard him say that the Roman State is man's finest dreams; but that one day man will dream a finer. Then there'll be no more Jews, no more Gentiles. Cæsar and Maccabee will mingle their dust, because all the earth will be one kingdom.

LAMECH: (*raging*) The half-Jew! The Arab upstart! When do we strike him? On the judgement seat or in his bed?

Cunningly.

Can't you teach your daughter how to hate?

ALEXANDRA: (*bitterly*) Herod has stolen her heart. Don't look to her to lead you! Look to me! My hatred alone acts. I hate him as Sarah hated Hagar's son. I'll not endure to be ruled by him. But you Pharisees mutter among yourselves and there it ends.

LAMECH: (*stung*) You work underground—so do I. Everywhere I have flung up my mole-hills. A horse can catch its foot in a mole-hill, pitch headlong and break its rider's back. Away rolls the crown!

ALEXANDRA: Lamech! Faithful, faithful! I breathe, I begin to be alive again. Tell me——

THE SERVANT: (*entering*) The perfume-seller is here.

ALEXANDRA: Let him come in!

The SERVANT admits the PERFUME-SELLER, a handsome, swaggering, quick-eyed youngster. ALEXANDRA nods to him, at the same time saying to the SERVANT:

ALEXANDRA: You can go.

The SERVANT hesitates.

What is it?

To the PERFUME-SELLER

Undo your bundle!

THE SERVANT: If the Queen comes here the Viceroy wishes to be told.

ALEXANDRA lifts her eyebrows, gives a quick look at LAMECH, is about to say something hasty, then checks herself.

ALEXANDRA: Say that we obey! But—you understand—forget to obey!

The SERVANT assents and goes out.

(angrily to LAMECH) Insolence!

Then to the PERFUME-SELLER

Come closer! Well, what have you to sell this time?

THE PERFUME-SELLER:

(glibly enjoying the intrigue) Amber—balm—sandal-wood—news! But——

He looks questioningly at LAMECH.

ALEXANDRA: You can speak in front of him.

THE PERFUME-SELLER:

(cunningly) Here is attar of roses.

ALEXANDRA impatiently takes the flask from him.

ALEXANDRA: *(contemptuously)* Rose-water!

THE PERFUME-SELLER:

Yet call it attar, for I had it from a merchant—*(significantly)*—who was in Alexandra three weeks ago.

ALEXANDRA: He saw the King?

THE PERFUME-SELLER:

He says that no one will ever see King Herod again.

LAMECH: (to ALEXANDRA) But Herod reached Alexandria, as we know.

ALEXANDRA: And we know that he had an interview with with Antony.

THE PERFUME-SELLER:

He entered the palace, but was never seen to leave it. Think what you choose. We of the markets know what *we* think. Also I have dried violets for the bath. I get them from a woman who dries them for Cleopatra. And *she* says that Cleopatra has been promised Herod's possessions beyond Jordan. Here is a pillow stuffed with balm, my lady. Lay your head on it and you'll sleep sound.

ALEXANDRA: If your news is true I need no other balm. Is there more?

The PERFUME-SELLER nods.

Tell it!

THE PERFUME-SELLER:

(*cunningly*) You don't catch me talking treason.

ALEXANDRA: Put your pillow and your news in the scales and you shall have the weight in gold. Well?

But the PERFUME-SELLER still shakes his sly head.

LAMECH: (*guessing at his meaning*) Is Herod dead?

ALEXANDRA: (*softly, in ecstasy*) Dead!

LAMECH: What proof?

The PERFUME-SELLER's eyes sparkle.

THE PERFUME-SELLER:

Does a living man part with his signet ring? Here!

He fumbles in his pouch and offers ALEXANDRA a ring. She takes it and she and LAMECH peer at it.

ALEXANDRA: (*tense*) Herod's!

To the PERFUME-SELLER:

Where did you get this?

THE PERFUME-SELLER:

It was sold to me by a fellow on the road, and he had it from a soldier—sick or drunk——

LAMECH: Roman?

THE PERFUME-SELLER:

One of Herod's own men.

ALEXANDRA: Enough. Wait outside! You shall be paid and double paid.

She barely waits for him to go before she turns to LAMECH.

Now Lamech! Now we strike!

LAMECH: If he's still alive?

ALEXANDRA: He'll be discredited—he'll be in flight. He was hard put to it if he used this as a bribe. Oh—the scales come down on our side!

LAMECH: But if the Romans——?

ALEXANDRA: We have no quarrel with the Romans! They're liberal, like Herod. They leave us our laws, our customs, they'll even tuck away our God in a corner of their Pantheon——

LAMECH: Do you want your tongue to wither in your mouth?

ALEXANDRA: (*riding him down*) So long as we give them money! It is our money that keeps Herod on the throne. Tell the people so! Then remind them that, though Herod murdered their High Priest, there's still a Maccabee left!

LAMECH: Mariamne? You'd trust her?

ALEXANDRA: Not for one instant. But if he dies now she'll wrap herself in widow's weeds for a month or so! That month or so I'll use!

LAMECH: But if he comes back?

ALEXANDRA: We will not wait for his "if". We rouse the

people—not to-morrow, not the next day—now! Meet Herod with a shower of stones and you'll see the last of him. Rome never yet upheld a weakling. Rouse the people!

LAMECH: (*kindling*) I'll do it. Go up to the roofs in an hour and look towards the market-place! You shall see! You will hear!

ALEXANDRA: Remember! We have no quarrel with Titus and his Romans. It is Herod's friends, and Joseph's friends who must be—stoned! I wish you good luck.

LAMECH: Wish me God's blessing.

He goes out. Left alone ALEXANDRA stands looking up.

ALEXANDRA: The Deaf-Mute's blessing?

She laughs, then she turns to the three MUTES, who still sit crouching where she left them, two of them busy in sign-talk, the third watching her with devotion.

(*tenderly*) Oh, my little silent people, have you been wondering what tune I play on this strange——

She touches her mouth.

—instrument of mine?

She seats herself, and the third MUTE creeps up to her with little signs of pleasure, patting her arm and looking up into her face.

You have your world—I mine. And the great One up there, He has His. But we are all deaf to each other's worlds—deaf, dumb, pitiful. Does he talk to me, do you suppose, as I talk to you, sure that I cannot hear Him, cannot understand, cannot betray?

The MUTE plucks urgently at her arm.

What, my sweet? Oh, I know what you want!

She stretches out her hand and pulls the tray of

flasks towards her. All three instantly surround her, and she deals out the contents of the tray.

Gently! There's plenty for all!

But one of them is rough and she slaps it.

Don't snatch!

The small creature is obstinate. She slaps it again.

No!

It cowers, and the other two stop their play, frightened.

Now you crouch. Now there's fear in your world, too. Yes, to you I'm Herod.

Once more she turns to the DEAF-MUTE who is again trying to take the flask.

No!

She takes both hands in hers and looks into the frightened eyes.

Now understand me! No!

The creature's head droops. She caresses it as she continues.

And that's all that Herod would do to me because I'm an old woman and his wife's mother. No, old woman! (*passionately*) I'd rather he killed me than bear this "No!"—this "Will you be good now?"

She bends over the MUTE

Good now? There, then!

She gives back the flask. Meanwhile MARIAMNE has entered and stands watching.

MARIAMNE: (*in disgust*) Send them away, Mother!

ALEXANDRA *looks up.*

ALEXANDRA: Do you grudge me my company? You give me little enough of yours. But—as you choose!

She turns to the dwarfs.

Play elsewhere, children!

With nods and signs she makes them understand

her meaning. They gather up the perfumes and trot away.

Why have you come?

MARIAMNE: To ask a question. To beg an answer. You have spies everywhere. What do they report of——

ALEXANDRA: Herod?

MARIAMNE: I ask no news of Herod. Joseph.

ALEXANDRA: You do not need my spies. Joseph is Herod's shadow. And so he must follow Herod's wife. All the palace knows it.

MARIAMNE: (*angrily*) What possesses him? Visits—presents—solicitudes!

ALEXANDRA: (*with malice*) A diligent shadow.

MARIAMNE: (*controlling her anger*) Mother, spare me, and for your own sake, listen! The folly began three days ago—but never a word from Selima. Can *you* guess what lies behind?

ALEXANDRA: He goes armed nowadays. He's always at your door, and his wife is kept out of the way. Oh yes, I can guess. He is Viceroy already. If Herod fell he would have to make his choice—kill Herod's widow, or——

MARIAMNE: (*with a faint smile*) Kill me? No! He would call his servants to do it and wring his hands and beg them to be gentle.

ALEXANDRA: (*returning the smile*) Indeed, it would be easier to marry you.

MARIAMNE: That is ugly, Mother!

ALEXANDRA: Life is ugly, daughter!

MARIAMNE: He is married to Selima.

ALEXANDRA: A woman can drown as easily as a boy. Joseph is a quick learner.

MARIAMNE: (*in sudden panic*) Mother! Mother! I am caught in a net! How shall I break it? I *should* have friends—my name should. Have I friends, Mother?

ALEXANDRA: Should I tell you if I knew?

MARIAMNE: Why not?

ALEXANDRA: It would mean trusting you.

MARIAMNE: Oh!

There is pain in her face. She turns away a little.

ALEXANDRA *looks at her intently, then her expression changes from contempt to interest, curiosity.*

ALEXANDRA: (*almost with wonder*) Is it possible that my reproach can hurt you?

MARIAMNE: (*in a stifled voice*) Not possible.

ALEXANDRA: Have I misjudged you? But they told me——

MARIAMNE: They—they——! What tales have you let “them” tell you—for the hundredth time?

ALEXANDRA: Only that you had less time than ever nowadays to be a daughter—or a sister.

MARIAMNE *starts.*

But at least they praised you as a pattern wife. There were tears and embraces enough on the day of Herod’s going.

She watches her closely.

Or is it a spiteful tale?

Insinuating.

I did not altogether believe it.

MARIAMNE: Why not believe it.

ALEXANDRA: Believe that you could forget so utterly your duty to us all?

MARIAMNE: “Us”? I belong to my husband. His people are my people. His joys I share. His sins I take upon me. I am no longer a Maccabee. I am the wife of Herod.

ALEXANDRA: But you are still my dead boy’s sister, even when you lay a wreath on his grave labelled: “Since Herod willed it, death was deserved.”

MARIAMNE: For pity’s sake——

ALEXANDRA: I have none.

MARIAMNE: (*roused*) Nor have I then. Who killed my

brother—the man who ordered this execution for his country's sake, or the woman who drove him to it for the sake of her own wicked pride? And now let the dead rest and be forgotten!

ALEXANDRA: Nine months I bore him in my womb. Shall I not weep nine months over his grave?

MARIAMNE: Weep? Yes.

ALEXANDRA: But my eyes run blood, not weak tears. If I can't wake him from his grave I'll send his murderers to sleep with him.

MARIAMNE: Then you must go yourself.

ALEXANDRA: This is my loving daughter!

MARIAMNE: Mother, that simple boy came to his dark end through you. He had no desire to rule. When you hung Aaron's mantle on him he only thought: "Does it suit me?" He never knew that when he wore it the people looked at him and saw—Messiah! But *you* knew. When you wrapped him in that mantle you wrapped him in his shroud.

ALEXANDRA: You slander us both.

MARIAMNE: I do not, Mother! If that young king of summer was mown down before his time, ambition did it.

ALEXANDRA: Herod's!

MARIAMNE: Yours! Herod is our master. Fate orders it—he obeys fate. But you obeyed your own desires when you played a half-grown boy against a man whose anger turns all men to straws and puppets. So he was blotted out; but not by Herod's will.

ALEXANDRA: Believe me, I'll avenge him!

MARIAMNE: Not upon Herod! His royal armour turns your shafts. Well, the next breast is mine. Strike there, then! I will not stop you. I will not even

ask whom you avenge—lost son or lost ambition. But remember this: Herod and I are one. If Herod dies I die with him.

ALEXANDRA: Then die! Die quickly!

MARIAMNE: Oh, I understand. You are so bold because your spies have told you that he is dead already, I daresay they believe it. The mob is a jealous mob. When it sees a great man go by it likes to say: "Even he must die like the rest of us." Then the next word is: "Have you heard? He's dead." Wrong, Mother! Your spies have cheated you. Herod is alive, I know it. My heart tells me. Feel the beat! Alive! Alive! Alive! Death casts a shadow, yes! But only upon me.

The SERVANT re-enters.

THE SERVANT: The Viceroy is demanding admittance.

MARIAMNE: Again!

ALEXANDRA: (*to the SERVANT*) Let him come in!

The SERVANT opens the door.

THE SERVANT: (*announcing*) The Viceroy!

MARIAMNE *seats herself.* ALEXANDRA *withdraws a little.*

JOSEPH *enters, followed by PHILO who is dressed as a guard. PHILO remains in the doorway. JOSEPH salutes MARIAMNE without noticing ALEXANDRA. The SERVANT retires.*

JOSEPH: Beautiful Mariamne—

ALEXANDRA: I am here also.

JOSEPH: (*abashed*) I did not see you. I came out of the sunlight. I was dazzled.

ALEXANDRA: By my daughter?

MARIAMNE: (*sharply*) Enough, Mother!

She turns to JOSEPH.

Why do you come to visit me without your wife?

ALEXANDRA: And look about you with such suspicion? My son is not hidden here. Once I hid him in a coffin till you dragged him out of it! This time you cannot drag him out of it.

MARIAMNE: Mother, Mother!

JOSEPH: I don't understand this reception.

ALEXANDRA: (to JOSEPH) Do you bring us news of Herod? When does he return? Mariamne, he does not answer us!

The SERVANT re-enters.

JOSEPH: (*hesitating*) The news—is not good.

MARIAMNE: Herod?

JOSEPH: I have heard nothing from Herod himself. But there are rumours——

THE SERVANT: The Commander of the Garrison desires to speak with the Viceroy.

JOSEPH: (to MARIAMNE, *ignoring* ALEXANDRA) May he come in?

MARIAMNE: (*coldly*) We are in your charge.

JOSEPH nods, the SERVANT flings wide the door. TITUS enters with SOHEMUS. TITUS goes to JOSEPH, SOHEMUS straight to MARIAMNE.

Sohemus! (*with formal charm*) Good friend of mine and Herod's, what brings you here, as always, when you're needed?

SOHEMUS: Trouble-makers. I've tracked them from my house, town by town, here to Jerusalem—too near to you for your safety, dearest Queen. I hurried to warn Titus.

He looks at TITUS, who is speaking to JOSEPH and now raises his voice.

TITUS: The rumour has got about that Herod's dead and the people are rising.

ALEXANDRA: (*bright-eyed*) Our people?

TITUS: The whole place is in an uproar.

- JOSEPH: Then—according to plan! Turn out the soldiers! Hurry!
- TITUS: I've done that already. Only I want to know—do you need prisoners or do you need corpses?
- JOSEPH: (*quickly*) No killing!
- TITUS: Then we'll scatter them before they start throwing stones. If you'd wanted to teach them a lesson I'd have waited.
- JOSEPH: Is Lamech mixed up in this?
- TITUS: Let me see—Lamech? That's the fool Pharisee who shuts his eyes when he sees a Roman coming. He nearly knocked his brains out against my shield once, because of that little habit. Oh yes, he's in it.
- JOSEPH: What is he doing? Speak up!
- TITUS: (*loudly*) Standing in the market place with half the city milling round him, calling down curses on Herod.
- JOSEPH: (*to ALEXANDRA*) It's only an hour ago since Lamech left you.
- ALEXANDRA: Which of your spies told you that?
- TITUS: (*to JOSEPH*) Are you coming down yourself?
- JOSEPH: As soon as I can.
- TITUS: Meanwhile we'll get to work!
- On this SOHEMUS salutes the Queen and joins
TITUS. They are at the door when ALEXANDRA
intervenes.*
- ALEXANDRA: A moment! Why have you withdrawn the Queen's guard.
- MARIAMNE: (*startled*) My guard.
- ALEXANDRA: Yes, since yesterday evening.
- JOSEPH: (*nervously*) I ordered it.
- TITUS: (*calmly*) And when he left King Herod told me that the Viceroy was to be obeyed in everything.
- JOSEPH: (*with a sneer, to ALEXANDRA*) Surely in this city it is protection enough to be a Maccabee.

ALEXANDRA: (*drawing MARIAMNE aside*) Now do you say that there's no cause for suspicion? Two sword-thrusts—my heart and yours—and the way to the throne is free.

MARIAMNE: That would be a thought of Selima's.

With a sudden spurt of rage.

I'll have her head. Herod shall avenge me on her!

ALEXANDRA: (*kindling*) Mariamne, you and I could use this revolt.

MARIAMNE: Why should I? If Herod returns I have nothing to fear.

ALEXANDRA: If not with you, then without you.

Resolutely she turns to leave the room. JOSEPH stops her.

JOSEPH: Where are you going?

ALEXANDRA: First to the roof. Then—just where I choose.

JOSEPH: On to the roof as soon as you please, but nowhere else.

ALEXANDRA: So we are prisoners?

JOSEPH: Only till quiet is re-established.

ALEXANDRA: (*to MARIAMNE*) I'll go up and see if I can signal our friends.

Once more ALEXANDRA begins to go.

JOSEPH: I'm afraid that I must send a guard with you.

He signs to one of the soldiers on the balcony.

ALEXANDRA: A declaration of war? I accept it.

She begins to climb the narrow stairway set in the wall, disappearing round the twist of it. The soldier follows, leaving PHILO. JOSEPH beckons him.

JOSEPH: (*in a low voice*) Well, do you understand what you have to do?

PHILO: (*repeating his lesson*) I'm to wait till the last moment, then——

He touches his sword.

JOSEPH: (*savagely*) And if you fail me I'll have you crucified.

PHILO: (*with a flash of teeth*) But it's not such a hard job, killing a woman.

He retires to his post on the balcony, out of earshot but just in sight. Meanwhile MARIAMNE seats herself, closely watching JOSEPH. As he turns she speaks, gently and with charm. If she is dangerous JOSEPH does not realise it.

MARIAMNE: And when did you get the news?

JOSEPH: What news?

MARIAMNE: The news of Herod's death. You would not risk so much unless he were dead.

JOSEPH: What do I risk?

MARIAMNE: (*suavely*) Nothing, if you are sure that the Romans will not protect me. Everything, if you've made a mistake.

JOSEPH: (*ardently*) And who threatens you?

MARIAMNE: (*smiling*) You.

JOSEPH: (*smiling back at her*) And there you're so wrong, beautiful Mariamne. I'm not a threat against you. I'm your defence.

He comes closer.

Why, Mariamne, if I had you here at my mercy——

MARIAMNE: (*softly, subtly*) Here I am at your mercy, Joseph.

JOSEPH: —if a naked sword were put into my hand——

MARIAMNE: (*smiling*) Look, it is in your hand!

JOSEPH: —if I were told: "Do you want to be safe—then strike her down! Do you want to be king——

MARIAMNE: —"then strike her down!" And who gave you that order, obedient Joseph?

JOSEPH: (*coming closer, enchanted*) How soft your voice is! You don't rail as Selima does. Your very mockeries are caresses.

MARIAMNE: Finish your long sentence, Joseph! Alone with

me, sword in hand, told to strike, what would you do? I'll tell you. . . . You would do what Selima told you to do.

JOSEPH: It was not Selima.

MARIAMNE: Ha!

JOSEPH: (*agitated*) And I will not do it. No. I can think of it, plan it, plot it, dream of it at night, devise it by day, but when it comes to the moment, when I am face to face with you, I cannot do it. My grasp on my own sword weakens. Look how my hand shakes, Mariamne. Beauty! Beauty is with power! I'm for you, Mariamne, not against you. Mariamne, trust me!

But his nearness is too much for her. She rises, crossing the room to the window, as if for air.

But in the instant he is beside her.

I would be kinder to you than Herod, if we shared throne and——

MARIAMNE: What was that? If we——? Finish it!

JOSEPH: (*desperately*) If we shared throne and bed.

MARIAMNE *turns*.

MARIAMNE: Now you have said it. Now you have brought your own death.

JOSEPH: You weren't in earnest?

MARIAMNE: I?

JOSEPH: You listened! You smiled at me. Your soft voice——

In sudden terror.

Mariamne——!

MARIAMNE: Even I shall pity you when Herod returns.

JOSEPH: But what will you tell him, Mariamne! There is nothing to tell him. I have done nothing. It is only your word against mine. Besides, he won't come back. Spy after spy has come in with the same report. I have nothing to fear from you and Herod.

MARIAMNE: (*gently*) If he is dead you have indeed nothing to fear.

JOSEPH: (*terrified*) That smile again! Do you tempt me to kill you? I won't! I won't be haunted! I'll leave you to Selima.

MARIAMNE: And she would be too late.

JOSEPH: What do you mean?

MARIAMNE: Give me sure news that Herod is gone and I'll be so quick to follow him that you'll not have time to draw your sword!

He gasps, and at that the anger dies out of MARIAMNE's face. She looks at him remote, wise, almost maternal.

Poor Joseph! Don't look so frightened! Love will never touch *you*.

JOSEPH: Love?

MARIAMNE: Love. Love will never put a sword into *your* hand to turn against your own breast.

JOSEPH stares at her.

JOSEPH: You mean——? You mean?

Suddenly he bursts into peals of laughter.

MARIAMNE: This is your comedy—not mine.

JOSEPH: (*hysterically*) You are free, Mariamne. Go where you please! Do what you choose! I won't come near you. I won't watch you, I hold you to your word.

MARIAMNE: Are you out of your mind?

JOSEPH: Yes, light-headed—light-hearted! The relief of it! I was the wrong man to choose for such work. The brother at me—the sister at me—but I could never have done it, Mariamne, not while you looked at me—no, not though Selima stood at my elbow. But now there's no need. I have your word.

He is about to go. MARIAMNE stops him.

MARIAMNE: Not yet!

- JOSEPH: I can go. I have your word.
- MARIAMNE: Why do you repeat it? Is the phrase a spell?
- JOSEPH: (*still hysterical*) It's relief! It's release! I have your word. Alive or dead I have nothing to fear from Herod. Farewell!
- MARIAMNE: (*like one choking*) Not yet! Wait! "Nothing to fear?" What did Herod say—do—threaten? To me he said—a dark saying——! How your look glitters! I will not have light let in, glittering on this darkness. Nothing to fear? What order did Herod give you?
- JOSEPH: (*with a harsh laugh*) I'm to tell you before I know he's dead? No!
- MARIAMNE: Dead? I see. Then you can accuse him of God knows what horror in order to further your plans for—throne and bed. No, Joseph, no! Say what you have to say now—when at any moment he may enter and give you the lie! What orders did Herod give?
- JOSEPH: (*unwillingly*) I don't say that he did, but *if* he did give orders to destroy you——
- MARIAMNE: Destroy me?
- JOSEPH: —it's only what you said yourself. Man and wife are one flesh. It's not so strange that he planned to take you with him. Mind you, I don't think he'd have gone so far if it hadn't been for——
- MARIAMNE: For what?
- JOSEPH: (*uneasily*) Well, you know how he hates Antony
- MARIAMNE: (*enlightened*) Antony!
- JOSEPH: (*hastily*) Not that he said so——
- MARIAMNE: (*to herself*) He did say it. He did say it. It was not just some foul bubble of the mind breaking on the surface, expelled, dispelled. His own soul spoke. Oh, I'm awake at last. Until to-day I've lived in a dream.

Turning upon JOSEPH.

Oh, fool of fools. Are *you* to show me Herod's heart? Oh—all ruin is wrought by fools! Wickedness is holy compared with the ruin wrought by fools.

JOSEPH: (*cowering at her feet*) But you won't tell him, Mariamne, that I told you. You dragged it out of me, but he'll think I betrayed him willingly. You know how terrible he can be; Aristobulus did nothing, but how he was punished for what he never had time to do! And I've done nothing. Can I help it that you draw my thoughts out of my eyes?

He is beside himself, clamouring and clutching at her dress, as the door is flung open. SELIMA hurries in, pushing aside the SERVANT who tries to detain her.

THE SERVANT: (*in abject protest*) But no one is allowed—the Viceroy's own orders!

JOSEPH: Selima.

SELIMA: (*to the SERVANT*) Go! Go!

THE SERVANT, *scared, slips away as she continues to JOSEPH.*

Ah! You stare at me as if I were a ghost. So I am—the mere ghost of a wife, ignored, forgotten.

She turns upon MARIAMNE.

How insatiable you are! First my brother, now my husband——

MARIAMNE: The ruin wrought by fools!

SELIMA: And my brother! He too was to be forgotten! Divorce for him and for me! His throne and—my bed!

JOSEPH: Will you listen?

SELIMA: She! She is to rule both!

JOSEPH: Will you let me speak?

ACT I

HEROD AND MARIAMNE

SELIMA: The infamy!

MARIAMNE: (*aside*) I see! I understand it all. To him I was just a piece of property.

JOSEPH: I deny it!

SELIMA: As you did this morning when I challenged you! Oh, you were glib. And I believed you. Then, with the whole town in an uproar, you desert me, you hurry to her side.

JOSEPH: I tell you, under orders! Orders from Herod!

SELIMA: Orders from Herod? I don't believe it.

MARIAMNE: Orders! Yes, that sets the seal on. (*in agony*)—outrage!

She raises her voice.

Selima.

SELIMA: Am I noticed at last? I am flattered.

MARIAMNE: No, thanked. You and he have healed me of a blindness. Sister, at last I could return that grudged kiss of yours.

ALEXANDRA enters unnoticed.

ALEXANDRA: All is—over!

SELIMA: (*drowning the old voice*) Mock me! Yes! But will you mock me so lightly when my brother comes?

ALEXANDRA: He is here. Herod is here!

The company stands stricken.

JOSEPH: (*at last*) Herod is here?

SELIMA: Here in the town?

ALEXANDRA: Here in the palace!

Nobody moves. In the distance a stir and a murmur is heard. Suddenly MARIAMNE sways. ALEXANDRA goes to her and steadies her with a gesture, harsh yet maternal.

MARIAMNE: Let me go!

She tries to free herself, moving to the exit. But ALEXANDRA, moving with her, still holds her arm.

ALEXANDRA: Where are you going?

MARIAMNE: Into the air—the gardens——

ALEXANDRA: (*in shrewd protest*) No.

MARIAMNE: The walls will stop me. (*wildly*) A garden's just a prison. Eden had walls.

SELIMA: (*in a triumphant whisper*) She daren't face him.

Simultaneously distant voices announce the coming of HEROD.

VOICES: (*off, repeating each other and growing louder*) The king! Make way for the King! The King!

SELIMA: (*exultant*) Too late—sister!

For she sees the approach of HEROD through the open door. MARIAMNE also sees it, stops, and as the tramp of armed feet becomes louder, retreats slowly, backing across the room. Only when she is stopped by the wall and can go no further does she recollect herself. Then she turns and flees up the staircase leading to the roof.

As she disappears HEROD appears in the doorway. With him are SOHEMUS and a group of fighting men. They bring in with them an air of bustle, hurry and excitement. HEROD himself wears armour and suits his bearing to it. He is, at the moment of his entrance, the master of the household, restoring order and efficiency by his mere presence. Having dealt with his household he then becomes the General, dealing in men's lives, with now and again a glance, a phrase, a twist of the mouth which show that a soldier is but one of HEROD's many roles. He calls over his shoulder to one of the soldiers as he enters:

HEROD: And when Judah has cleared the Square send him to me.

He pauses in the doorway and gives a swift glance round the room. His face darkens.

But the Queen's not here!

He turns upon a SERVANT.

You told me——

THE SERVANT: (*stammering*) I thought——

HEROD: You thought—you thought! Didn't you *know*?
Such a small duty, and you can't do it.

Then, as the SERVANT cringes almost to the ground in his terror.

No matter! Go to her! Find her! Tell her I'm here for a bare hour!

SELIMA catches the SERVANT's eye and points to the stairs. Then, as the SERVANT scuttles away, she turns to HEROD.

SELIMA: (*eagerly*) Herod—your wife——

But HEROD is already giving orders to another SERVANT.

HEROD: And you—take word from me to Joab! Lamech goes to the prisons—in chains. The rest of the haul hold for further orders. Meanwhile parade them, bound.

To himself, as the SERVANT departs on his errand:

A pitiful lot! Still, we shall have to use them.

He turns to SOHEMUS.

Sohemus, does it still bleed? You saved my life, old friend. That stone was aimed at my head. What brought you from Galilee on the nick of time?

SOHEMUS: Why, a week ago I got on the track of a conspiracy that I traced back to Lamech and—forgive me—palace quarters.

HEROD: (*comprehending*) Women's quarters!

SOHEMUS: So I came down myself to see the Viceroy—and found I was too late. Half the town ablaze! But as usual you arrive at the critical moment. How do you do it?

HEROD: (*jovially*) Much as you do. I'm glad to have you.

Once more he surveys the room, then singles out

JOSEPH.

My Joseph!

JOSEPH *hurries to him.*

Sohemus here reports that there's trouble in Galilee.

JOSEPH: I didn't know.

HEROD: (*sinister*) And why didn't you know, my Joseph? A King's business is to know everything a full hour before his ministers find out anything. I don't expect to find my Viceroy skulking in the women's rooms when outside half Jerusalem is calling for my blood. It seems to me that if you're left in charge any longer this small, impudent fire will spread. I'll have to teach you better than this, Joseph. Yes—you shall come to the war with me and learn to be more than a half king. No use in doing things by halves—half king, half brother——

SELIMA: Half husband——

HEROD, for the first time, realises her presence.

HEROD: Selima! Dear sister!

He holds out his arms.

SELIMA: (*clinging to him*) We've needed you, Herod. Welcome home!

HEROD: Not yet. I'm as much a passer-by to-day as any of the lovers you used to snub when you were a girl. Eh, Joseph? Remember her then?

But as JOSEPH is about to respond TITUS enters and HEROD at once puts SELIMA aside and gives TITUS his whole attention.

Ah, Titus!

His manner is that of the professional soldier.
Did they give you much trouble?

TITUS: (*laughing*) That rabble? Just a little exercise for my men.

ACT I

HEROD AND MARIAMNE

HEROD: They'll have more soon. I'm taking most of them. I'm leaving Sohemus in charge. He's already sent for his Galilee regiments. And then there'll be the sick and those who are on leave. It's not much, but it's all I can spare you: and not only to keep Jerusalem quiet, but all Palestine.

Everyone listens with tense excitement, but

TITUS is the quickest to realise the situation.

TITUS: Not wars, then! War!

HEROD: That's it. Our masters are pulling the world in two: Octavius and Rome against Antony and the East. That's why Antony summoned me. He knew war was coming, and that doubtful message was devised to fetch me to him without rousing suspicion.

Again his manner changes.

Oh, by the way——

He turns to ALEXANDRA.

—my friend Antony sent you a greeting. "Tell her," he said, "that I don't propose to try a river for murder, nor to hold the King through whose land it flows responsible for its—dangerous currents."

ALEXANDRA bows with exaggerated servility.

ALEXANDRA: I accept his ruling on behalf of my dead son.

HEROD: Good, then we are friends again!

ALEXANDRA: (*softly*) Whether my daughter will accept it on behalf of her dead brother I cannot, of course say.

HEROD: She will accept it. The Queen! Does she not know I'm here? Has she not had my ring?

SELIMA: (*shrilly*) She fled because she was sick with fear.

HEROD: It is dangerous to come between a husband and his wife.

SELIMA: You do not wish to know why she was afraid?

HEROD: My wife does as she pleases. And if it pleases her to bewilder you by her behaviour—well, it pleases me too.

SELIMA laughs. He turns on her.

When I came in I was happy, wholly happy. You might have seen it. But no, you must ruin my moment——

MARIAMNE comes slowly down the staircase.

HEROD sees her and his face lights up.

Ah, she brings it back—the unspoiled moment. Mariamne.

But instead of returning his greeting MARIAMNE makes a deep, formal obeisance.

MARIAMNE: The King has sent for me?

HEROD stares.

HEROD: Is this my welcome?

MARIAMNE: (*formally*) Have I been fetched here to welcome the King? Oh! Then I welcome the King. Has he any further orders to give me?

HEROD: (*staring*) I don't understand this. What is the matter with you, Mariamne?

He waits for an answer.

Why do you stand there as if all the deserts of my journey still lay between us.

Again he waits. Again she makes no sign.

What is the matter with you, Mariamne? Is it nothing to you that I stand here safe and sound?

MARIAMNE: Nothing? It is everything.

HEROD: (*eagerly*) Ah, dearest——

MARIAMNE: (*preventing his approach*) For my life is as much to me as yours to you.

HEROD: Your life?

MARIAMNE: Must you pretend not to understand me?

HEROD stares at her a moment, appalled, then offers her his hand, saying:

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HEROD AND MARIAMNE

HEROD: Come, we must talk of this alone!

MARIAMNE *does not move.*

(*angrily*) Come!

MARIAMNE: (*stubborn as a stone*) No.

On which HEROD in one lightning gesture of wrath, cries out to everyone in the room:

HEROD: Leave us!

All hurry out, terrified, except ALEXANDRA, who stands a moment, hesitating. But as HEROD makes a second gesture her courage fails and she goes. Husband and wife are left alone. MARIAMNE breaks the silence.

MARIAMNE: It was so pitifully mean.

There is a gesture of dismay from HEROD.

So greedy and so gross! He can hardly bear to leave behind his property, his cattle. Then how can he leave his wife.

HEROD realises that she knows the truth.

How could you think so little of yourself or so much of Antony? Even if you were so despairingly sure that I did not love you, had you to be so sure that I'd welcome Antony? He had to kill you before asking me to fill those few hours which Cleopatra does not claim. And you thought that your wife would not repulse your murderer. Why did you hold yourself and her so cheap?

HEROD: How do you know this?

She gives him no answer.

Whoever told you this secret risked his head.

She makes no response.

What did you give him that he valued more than his life? What unique bribe did you offer?

MARIAMNE: All your thoughts are of property and payment.

HEROD: What price? What price?

MARIAMNE: Ask him!

HEROD: (calling) Sohemus!
Then to MARIAMNE:

Hear me ask!
SOHEMUS enters.

SOHEMUS: Sir?

HEROD: Where is the half-king, Joseph?

SOHEMUS: He is waiting with the others.

HEROD: He holds a letter which I wish delivered at once, and by him. See that he does it, and that every order in the letter is carried out——

SOHEMUS assents and goes. HEROD turns back to MARIAMNE.

—and in spite of all you guess or have been told, still you have not for one instant understood my dealings with you.

At this point, or near it, one of ALEXANDRA'S MUTES slips into the room from the staircase and stands unnoticed, watching.

MARIAMNE: I understand that you planned to rob me of my life.

HEROD: (gently) Come here to me! No need for all this passion.

His look compels her and she moves slowly toward him. He looks up at her.

Sit down! Now! Give me your hand!

She makes no movement. He takes her hand. It lies passive in his palm.

This hand is cold as death.

MARIAMNE: You chilled it.

HEROD: Help me to warm it again. Dearest——

MARIAMNE: Who? I?

HEROD: Who else is dearest? Fatal—to be so dear. Can't you understand? You are so dear that when I played my game against Fate I made you the stake. The dearest treasure makes even a coward brave. Snatch a miser's bag from him and the

poor rat will attack like a lion. Take a beaten soldier's colours and he will rise and fling himself upon a hundred spears to earn it back. You were my bag of gold. You were my colours. Woman—beloved—I hung a sword over you so that Antony *could* not destroy me. For I was desperate when I went to him. I had no hope—no least hope. But—you were to die if I lost the throw, and so I *could* not lose! I'd staked my soul.

MARIAMNE *is moved, and he sees it.*

Take back your words! You were not "property." You were not "cattle."

MARIAMNE

(*deliberately*) I take those two words back.

The DEAF-MUTE has followed the scene with watchful eyes and head cocked, like an intelligent dog. As the change in MARIAMNE'S bearing becomes noticeable the MUTE puts finger to lip and slips silently away again up the stairs.

HEROD:

Take them all back. "Pitiful" and "coward" you called me. But how can a king afford to be brave? Courage is reserved for honest underlings, born to obey orders. But I obey one order only: "Keep the people safe!" To do that I must fight if it's wise to fight, but also cringe if it's wise to cringe, and often hesitate, blow hot and cold, kind and cruel: and always I must be afraid that my own nature will rise up against me in disdain and pride. Yes, I'm a coward; for I fear the rebel in me. But take back your other words, your "pitiful," your "mean." I am not pitiful. I am not mean. I know myself.

MARIAMNE *stares at him, in spite of herself half reconciled by his bearing, although she is unconvinced by what he says.*

MARIAMNE: Better than I know you? You are master of words—of words—and my master!

ALEXANDRA appears at the top of the stairs, watching. The MUTE is with her.

HEROD: (*close to her*) Ah, Mariamne! Forgive me—yesterday!

MARIAMNE: O kind God, grant me a yesterday! Turn back your wheel!

HEROD: Mariamne!

He puts his arms round her. She does not yield, but she does not repulse him. But he is interrupted by the voice of SELIMA.

SELIMA: (*without*) The King! I must see the King!

She rushes in. HEROD without releasing MARIAMNE, surveys her.

Where have you sent my husband? All of a sudden I hear about me whispers—horrible, graveyard whispers! Where is he?

HEROD: At his dying.

SELIMA screams.

SELIMA: Dying? What has he done? You can't condemn him unheard.

HEROD: He has condemned himself.

SELIMA: Herod! Brother—my own brother—the nearest thing to me in life! Listen! Surely you can listen. What offence? Against the State?

HEROD: I am the State.

SELIMA: Don't put me off with words. What offence? Because he was dazzled by her beauty? She did obsess him—he was forever muttering her name in his dreams. But that's not treasonable. There was no sin against you—only a thought.

HEROD: He is innocent of any crime except the crime of—chattering!

SELIMA: Then let him defend himself!

HEROD: It is because he can defend himself that he dies.

ACT I

HEROD AND MARIAMNE

SELIMA: What shall you do to her?
HEROD: Sister, the truth is hard, but you must face it.
Your husband betrayed me——

SELIMA: If my husband betrayed you so did she. It will
take her blood as well as his to wash your
honour clean.

HEROD: He never touched my honour.

SELIMA: Then what was his crime?

HEROD: I trusted him with a secret, and he—told!

SELIMA: Do you think you can deceive me? You're
trying to protect her. But unless you kill me as
you kill my husband you won't succeed.

HEROD: Selima, sister——!

SOHEMUS enters.

HEROD: Is it over?

SOHEMUS: Over!

SELIMA: Oh God!

*But the cry is scarcely articulate. MARIAMNE
tries to support her.*

Don't touch me!

She rushes to SOHEMUS.

Give me his last word. Was it for me?

SOHEMUS: He was gagged.

SELIMA reels. MARIAMNE turns upon HEROD.

MARIAMNE: I still say "pitiful" and "mean"!

HEROD: Ha!

SELIMA: *(to MARIAMNE)* He is dead. Are you satisfied?
Do you feel safe? It is wise of you to have him
silenced. Now you can swear what you please.

SELIMA exits.

MARIAMNE: She is in agony.

HEROD: After a while the nerve dies.

MARIAMNE: *(as if about to go herself)* Someone should go with
her.

HEROD: *(stopping MARIAMNE)* Follow her, Sohemus!

SOHEMUS hurries out.

HEROD: Now, Mariamne! Now! I will have this business clear before I go. Because I trust you I shut Joseph's lying mouth for ever. Now open yours! Explain why he risked his life by revealing the secret I hid from you. For the sake of your own woman's dignity, tell me the truth.

MARIAMNE: What would be left of my dignity if I did?

HEROD: Have I no rights?

MARIAMNE: Rights?

She makes an effort.

I—I swear to you, my husband, that I am your faithful wife; that your servant Joseph has never touched——

She cannot continue.

No! No, Herod! I will not speak the words. I'll not concede such rights, answer such questions—such questions!

HEROD: If you'd loved me enough to forgive what I did for love of you, then there'd be no need. But because each word shows how little you care, I repeat the question. Why did Joseph reveal to you that mortal secret?

MARIAMNE: I will not tell you. Our souls strain apart.

HEROD: (*about to break into a rage*) Then——

MARIAMNE: Husband—take care! We are married, you and I. Long ago we built ourselves one house for our two souls. In it we lie safe—through time safe—in eternity safe together. But doubt me, blind Samson, and you pull the house about our ears. Do you want this end? Does even your rage want such ruin—ruin—ruin?

HEROD: All I ask for is some drug to deaden my dreams.

MARIAMNE: Herod——

*Entrance of TITUS and the Roman soldier,
followed by SOHEMUS and ALEXANDRA.*

TITUS: Forgive me! The occasion over-rules your

privacy. Everything is ready. You should be going.

Then, as the messenger makes an obeisance.

Despatches from Antony!

MARIAMNE: Going!

As HEROD takes the cylinder and unrolls it and begins to read.

ALEXANDRA: *(ironical, but with a certain undercurrent of tenderness)*
Are you still alive, my daughter?

MARIAMNE: Mother, did you hear? He's going?

The two women draw together as HEROD looks up from his letter. He forgets everything but the gravity of the news, and speaks curtly, as a soldier.

HEROD: *(looking up from the dispatch to TITUS)* Events have moved fast since I left. Octavius has sailed, and Antony and Cleopatra are hurrying to oppose him.

SOHEMUS: *(to HEROD)* You're to join them?

HEROD: Not yet. The Arabs are in revolt. We have first to see to it that they don't link up with the enemy.

TITUS: *(to HEROD)* So you head East?

HEROD: And clear the deserts. Then on to Actium.

Meanwhile, the immediate stress over, HEROD once again realises the presence of MARIAMNE and begins to watch her.

TITUS: *(to HEROD)* Do I go with you?

HEROD: No, you stay here under Sohemus. Take orders from him as you would from me!

TITUS salutes and steps back a little.

HEROD: *(to the messenger)* Take a fresh horse and return to Antony. Tell him the Arabs shall be held.

The messenger bows and retires.

SOHEMUS: *(startled, proud of the honour)* Do you make me—Viceroy?

But HEROD's whole attention is now on his wife.

HEROD AND MARIAMNE

ACT I

MARIAMNE: Oh, Mother, God is gracious—slow to anger—plenteous in mercy! Once when our fathers were hard pressed He bade the sun stand still——

ALEXANDRA: To give more time for vengeance on our enemies.

MARIAMNE: God has done more for me. He reverses the wheel. The hours, the days, the weeks, revolve backwards. A second chance. At last I shall know if it was just a rage of passion, or whether indeed his soul betrayed my soul.

HEROD: Mariamne!

He strides across the room to her. SOHEMUS and TITUS watch. ALEXANDRA backs away from them and her MUTE scuttles to her side, catching at her skirt. She sits and she caresses its head as she watches. But in the huge room MARIAMNE and HEROD are as private as if they were alone.

HEROD: (again, softly) Mariamne!

She turns.

HEROD: I leave again to-night.

MARIAMNE: I heard!

HEROD: Don't look too happy! One does not always get killed.

MARIAMNE *begins to speak, then stops herself.* But don't look too sad, either; for this is no petty war. This war decides who is to be master of the world, Antony of the passions, or Octavius who boasts that he was never in his life drunk or in love. Whoever wins, my path won't be easy. Still—I'm afraid it's just possible that you won't get your wish.

MARIAMNE: My wish! (agitated) We've said enough to each other. We've said enough!

HEROD: More than enough.

He cannot look at her.

Farewell!

He turns from her.

Sohemus, you'll ride with us to the first camp,
I've last orders for you.

*He is preparing to go without another look at
MARIAMNE. She stops him.*

MARIAMNE: I shall not see you again before you go?

HEROD: No! *I've* no wish to be seduced from *my* duty.

*He goes out. MARIAMNE stands looking after
him, her lip quivering.*

MARIAMNE: Later he'll be sorry—sorry enough to break his
heart. It's his own trespass that drives him.
Don't I know that. Guide him, O Lord! Protect
him! And forgive me if I—was I too stubborn,
Mother?

ALEXANDRA: You ask, but you don't want an answer. I'm
your mute.

MARIAMNE: I was ready to follow him to the grave. I'm still
ready. What more can I do? We must be
patient. God has put him to the test, not I. But
if he endures how I shall be able to reward him!
So let the test stand. Fate has given him and me
our last three months to live a second time. Let
him deal justly this second time and I'll forgive
all he did unjustly! Mother, it'll be no more to
me—all he has said and done—than if in
delirium he struck at me with his sword; then,
when his mind was clear, bound up my wounds.

THE CURTAIN FALLS

ACT II

SCENE I

A few weeks later.

ALEXANDRA'S apartment. MARIAMNE is leaning against one of the window pillars. She is staring out, shading her eyes against the strong sunlight. A WOMAN SLAVE is seen beyond her on the balcony, holding a feather fan. The sunlight strikes full on MARIAMNE and the slave, but the apartment itself is, as usual, dark and shabby. ALEXANDRA is on the couch to the left of the apartment, her DEAF-MUTES about her. A READER slave stands at a desk, reading aloud from a roll of parchment. Other SERVANTS stand with fans behind ALEXANDRA. The scene is peaceful and intimate.

THE READER: "And Pharaoh charged all his people, saying: 'Every son that is born ye shall cast into the river, and every daughter ye shall save alive.'"

ALEXANDRA: (*softly*) Mariamne!

During the two next verses ALEXANDRA watches MARIAMNE.

THE READER: "And there went a man of the house of Levi and took to wife a daughter of Levi . . . and the woman bore a son. And when she saw that he was a goodly child she hid him three months."

ALEXANDRA: Mariamne!

THE READER: "And when she could no longer hide him she took for him an ark of bulrushes . . . and put the child therein. And she laid it in the flags by the river's brink. And his sister Miriam stood afar off to watch."

ALEXANDRA gets slowly to her feet.

ALEXANDRA: Mariamne!

She goes slowly across the room and stands by the window. During her crossing of the room the READER continues.

THE READER: "And the daughter of Pharaoh came down to wash herself at the river. And when she saw the ark among the flags she sent her maid to fetch it. And when she had opened it she saw the child."

ALEXANDRA: (to MARIAMNE) You will blind yourself.

MARIAMNE, by a half movement, shows that she is aware of her mother's presence, but she continues to stare out.

THE READER: (softly) "And behold the babe wept and she had compassion on him. Then said his sister: 'Shall I call for thee a nurse of the Hebrew women?' "

ALEXANDRA: (scolding) Staring out into the sunshine, hour after hour!—day after day! Let a maid watch for you!

MARIAMNE: I trust my own eyes.

THE READER: "And his sister went and called the child's mother."

ALEXANDRA: No one else is to be trusted?

MARIAMNE: No one.

ALEXANDRA: Least of all your mother!

MARIAMNE: Least of all my mother!

Once more she stares out, shading her eyes.

THE READER: (triumphantly) "And the child grew. And she brought him unto Pharaoh's daughter and he became her son. And she called him Moses."

ALEXANDRA: Enough!

Then, to MARIAMNE.

But his sister's name was Mariamne—(tenderly)—little Miriam. By that name her mother blessed her when she saved her brother. (bitterly) But times are changed between mothers and daughters of our race. (wistfully) You don't trust me and I don't understand you.

MARIAMNE *takes a step further from her mother out into the sunlight.* ALEXANDRA *pursues her with her voice rather than by movement.*

You said: "If Herod dies I won't survive him," and I was ashamed that a daughter of mine should be so besotted. But he returned and you received him as an enemy.

MARIAMNE: It pleased *you*. Assume that I did it to please you.

ALEXANDRA: (*putting aside this taunt*) In a rage he goes away again. At once you begin to watch for him, lovesick as a bride.

MARIAMNE *moves her shoulders restlessly and takes a step across the threshold into the sunshine, further away from her mother.*

(*grumbling*) I don't understand modern women. Hate and love were enough when I was young.

During this speech the doorkeeper has come hurriedly across the room and waits at her elbow. He now begins to speak in a low voice.

(*irritated*) What? Speak up! Titus and Sohemus. *She turns back to her daughter.*

Mariamne! Titus is here with Sohemus.

MARIAMNE: Admit Titus. I will not see Sohemus.

ALEXANDRA: If you continue to refuse to see him it will be interpreted as an affront to Herod himself.

MARIAMNE: I will not see Sohemus.

ALEXANDRA: (*cunningly*) You used to be friends with him.

MARIAMNE: I know.

ALEXANDRA: Then why not receive him? Why keep him at arm's length? He's told me plainly that he has something to tell you.

MARIAMNE: You know that? So do I! But Herod shall never say that I tempted his friend to betray a secret——

Suddenly she realises ALEXANDRA's eager interest and breaks off hurriedly with:

—if he has a secret.

THE SLAVE GIRL:

There, on the sky-line! The black speck!

MARIAMNE *hurries out through the window.*

MARIAMNE'S VOICE:

Where?

THE SLAVE GIRL:

Something moved.

MARIAMNE'S VOICE : (*in disappointment*)

Only a hawk stooping to the kill.

A SERVANT flings open the door. TITUS enters with LAMECH. LAMECH is worn by prison.

ALEXANDRA: Free?

LAMECH: (*triumphantly*) God is *not* deaf.

TITUS: (*formally*) As Sohemus is refused admittance——

ALEXANDRA: Not by me.

TITUS: By the Queen, though.

ALEXANDRA: *I*—regret it.

TITUS: So does he. But he is none the less anxious to anticipate her wishes——

Then, with a bow, to ALEXANDRA:

—and yours. And so he has released to you your favourite.

ALEXANDRA: (*slowly*) Sohemus dared?

With her quick intelligence.

What lies behind it? A battle? News has come in?

TITUS: (*coldly*) I can't tell you. I merely carry out orders.

LAMECH: Even in prison we have heard rumours.

ALEXANDRA: Mariamne!

(*to TITUS*) There have been dispatches from Herod?

TITUS *shakes his head.*

(*with rising excitement*) Mariamne!

She turns again to TITUS.

From Antony? From Octavius? Mariamne!

At last MARIAMNE turns and comes slowly towards them from the edge of the balcony.

(*to* TITUS) Have the two armies met? Which wins? Is the battle won? Already? Ah, you know. I see that you know.

MARIAMNE *crosses the threshold of the window.*

TITUS: (*stubbornly*) I make my military reports to the Viceroy only.

MARIAMNE *enters. She puts up her hand to her eyes.*

MARIAMNE: You called me? I can hardly see. I'm dazzled by the sun.

ALEXANDRA: News!

MARIAMNE: Is it Titus? You're very welcome. You have news for me? Who stands behind you? Come nearer!

LAMECH *takes a step or two towards her.*

Lamech!

She looks from one to another.

Who dared set you free?

LAMECH: The Viceroy! By God's orders—and yours.

MARIAMNE *turns to* TITUS *in enquiry.*

MARIAMNE: Mine? Send for Sohemus.

TITUS *in turn signals to one of the soldiers in attendance on him.*

LAMECH: Did you not send orders to Sohemus? I blessed you. I took it as a sign of repentance.

MARIAMNE: What should I repent?

LAMECH: The sins of your husband, and your own apostasy. Well, if you didn't order it, God did.

MARIAMNE: God does not interfere nowadays. The pillar of fire that smoked in the wilderness is burnt out.

LAMECH: You think so? "Vengeance is mine. I will

repay," saith the Lord. And so I warn you, daughter of the Maccabees, renounce this stranger, separate yourself from him as he has separated himself from God and the people, or share the lightning as it strike him.

A SERVANT: (announcing) The Viceroy Sohemus!

SOHEMUS enters. *He is changed in manner. He looks burdened but resolute. He is much less the simple soldier of the earlier acts. He bows deeply to the two women.*

MARIAMNE: I have sent for you——

SOHEMUS: (with significance) I hoped that you would find it necessary.

LAMECH: (to ALEXANDRA) I go to the temple to give thanks.

He begins to go out. MARIAMNE sees him. With sudden authority she addresses herself to SOHEMUS and includes TITUS.

MARIAMNE: He is to be held. Sohemus!

SOHEMUS: You wish it?

MARIAMNE: Herod wishes it. Herod ordered him to be kept in prison till his return. Is Herod no longer king? Have him instantly taken back to the prison.

SOHEMUS hesitates.

I am Herod's queen. I order it!

SOHEMUS and TITUS look at each other. Then SOHEMUS nods in silence to TITUS who, also in silence, signals to his men. They surround LAMECH and pinion him.

ALEXANDRA: (in entreaty) Mariamne!

MARIAMNE: No, Mother!

LAMECH: (as he goes) "How is the faithful city become an harlot! It was full of judgement; righteousness lodged in it; but now murderers."

They hustle him out, TITUS following.

ALEXANDRA: Murderers!

Beaten, she cowers on her couch, a neglected and powerless old woman. Her DEAF-MUTES huddle round her, caressing her. Meanwhile MARIAMNE seats herself in a high chair. It gives the illusion of a throne. She surveys SOHEMUS.

MARIAMNE: Now, Sohemus!

SOHEMUS stares back at her steadily, but not with defiance.

SOHEMUS: Why did you release the Pharisee?
You've always refused to see me. But I knew you'd instantly enquire into any defiance of Herod's orders.

MARIAMNE: Yes, you know me.

SOHEMUS: These many years now.

There is a pause.

MARIAMNE: Will you believe that I'm your faithful servant?
Are you Herod's friend?

SOHEMUS: Once I was his friend.

Again there is a pause as they stare at each other.

MARIAMNE: Have you any good reason for wanting to see me?

SOHEMUS: At least one. The struggle is over.

ALEXANDRA is on her feet. MARIAMNE turns, startled.

There is a new name in history—Actium.

ALEXANDRA: Who won?

SOHEMUS: Eternal Rome.

ALEXANDRA: Exit Herod!

SOHEMUS: Antony killed himself. Cleopatra followed him.

MARIAMNE: She? She had the courage? And she couldn't look at a naked blade! Your news is sure?

SOHEMUS: Titus had dispatches from Octavius.

MARIAMNE: So Antony is dead. The world will breathe easier. Why that smile?

SOHEMUS: You don't know Octavius. He won't be satisfied with Antony's death. His friends will follow him. Antony will hold court again in the after-world.

MARIAMNE: Herod?

SOHEMUS: His last words to me were: "I'm no friend of Antony's nowadays, but he's been my friend and so I suppose I shall have to stand by him.

MARIAMNE: (*smiling in pride*) Herod, the King!

SOHEMUS: (*ironically*) A royal gesture. But Octavius isn't the man to admire royal gestures. If Herod held to his resolution——

MARIAMNE: Who doubts it? Do you?

SOHEMUS: —he'll be dead by now, that's certain.

MARIAMNE *reels, then controls herself.*

MARIAMNE: If he were dead I should know—here.

She touches her heart. Nevertheless, as if for a moment she is beyond controlling herself, she puts her hand across her eyes.

SOHEMUS: Believe me, he is dead.

MARIAMNE: And because you believe it you dared what you dared to-day. You're no fool. You'd always be sure of your ground. But you forgot me. I'll show you that I can see to it that Herod is obeyed. Those whom he freed shall stay free; those whom he honoured shall be honoured still; and those whom he condemned shall die. Not one command that he has given shall be ignored.

SOHEMUS: Not one?

MARIAMNE: Not one.

ALEXANDRA *stands tense.*

SOHEMUS: Sweet Queen, if I am to fulfil every command of Herod's, then I must slay you also.

There is a long pause. MARIAMNE breaks it with a long sobbing sigh.

ALEXANDRA: (*coming to her*) My daughter—— Do you see him clear at last?

To SOHEMUS.

And yet—it's beyond belief!

MARIAMNE: You need not doubt it.

SOHEMUS: Queen Mariamne, am I to slay you also?

MARIAMNE: (*softly*) This is the end. I have had nothing. I have nothing. I shall have nothing.

She snatches the dagger at her girdle and is about to strike herself when ALEXANDRA catches her arm.

ALEXANDRA: Are you mad? Sohemus!

SOHEMUS *comes quickly to her, supporting her as she reels against him.*

SOHEMUS: (*passionately*) Dearest, beloved Queen——!

MARIAMNE: You are right, both of you. I must not cheat him. This is his office.

She lets the dagger fall.

ALEXANDRA: Send for Titus! You must put yourself under the protection of Rome. We all must.

MARIAMNE: Do it, Mother. I shan't hinder you.

She breaks off, her eyes turned to the window.

A MAID: (*in the window*) Mistress!

MARIAMNE *starts. Her whole manner changes from dull acquiescence to tenseness.*

MARIAMNE: Do you see it?

THE MAID: I see it! It's wheeling. It's fluttering. It has travelled far.

MARIAMNE *turns back to them. Her smile is dangerous, her manner full of suppressed excitement as she says:*

MARIAMNE: My little princes lost a favourite yesterday. The cage was left open—away the bird flew, and the children cried their eyes out. They've been watching for it all day, and so have I. Yes, that's how we're made. The world is torn in two.

Crowns tumble. And yet I watch for a speck in the sky and listen for a foolish beat of wings.

THE MAID: It's settling. Shall I try to take it?

MARIAMNE: Wait!

She hurries out.

ALEXANDRA: "Unstable as water!" That is my daughter. You'd have said her heart broke ten breaths ago. If I had not caught her arm——

SOHEMUS silently agrees.

But look at her! Her little prince has lost a pet bird, and all the rest is forgotten.

SOHEMUS: I wish—to understand her.

ALEXANDRA: You waste a wish.

As he turns to the window MARIAMNE re-enters. She holds against her breast a white pigeon which she is soothing.

MARIAMNE: (*murmuring to the bird*) All over! You shall rest. A quiet cage. Water and food. Rest now!

She beckons to a servant and gives the bird to her.

She lifts her head.

Mother, will you send your servant to the mayor of the palace. He is to come to me himself.

ALEXANDRA beckons to one of her own

ATTENDANTS, but hesitating and puzzled.

ALEXANDRA: The mayor of the palace?

MARIAMNE: At once. It is nearly sunset. I have orders to give him before sunset.

ALEXANDRA: (*shrugging*) As you choose.

She turns and gives an order to the ATTENDANT, who hurries out. Meanwhile there is a pause.

MARIAMNE leans against the pillar, staring out at the sunset.

MARIAMNE: We shall forget the light.

SOHEMUS crosses to her.

SOHEMUS: Dearest Queen! Forgive me, but I share this grief. I feel this blow.

MARIAMNE: You? Life has corrupted you as it corrupts everyone, or you would not be so quick to snatch your own advantage out of my misery and Herod's——

Her voice fails.

SOHEMUS: (*sturdily*) Sweet Queen, you're unjust to me. I've not been less Herod's servant because I knew you long ago, and saw you take the royaller man. We understood each other, he and I. He trusted the honest man in me; I trusted the king in him. Always honour between us two—us three.

MARIAMNE: I thought so too.

SOHEMUS: So did I, until he gives me filthy work to do, knowing that to do it is my death. Was it fair dealing to make me his scape-goat? What would the Romans do to me? What would your people do? What, in the end, would I do to myself if I turned woman-killer to please Herod? When he gave me that foul order, then at last I knew how Herod valued me, his bosom friend.

MARIAMNE: Yet you said nothing?

SOHEMUS: Not I. If I'd refused the office of executioner he'd have found someone else. And what would have become then of—

His voice softens.

—you?

MARIAMNE: I take back my words. He outraged you as he outraged me. He treats his friends as he treats his wife. And so—I invite you to my feast.

ALEXANDRA: Feast?

MARIAMNE: A queen's feast, Mother. Esther's own banquet, with songs, lights, dancing. I've not forgotten how to dance, and I shall dance to-night because I'm free again—widowed, divorced, anyway free. I'll wear my pearls.

THE MAYOR of the palace enters, a flustered and perturbed dignitary, followed by his stewards.

THE MAYOR: The Queen sent for us.

MARIAMNE: These are my orders. You will open the state apartments and prepare a banquet. You will invite to it every member of the Court as well as the principal citizens of Jerusalem, and you will fling open the gardens to the populace. Light torches by the hundred and candles by the thousand! Every blossom in the palace gardens is to be gathered and woven into garlands—every one! Let there be desolation afterwards! There shall not be a flower left to fruit, nor a green thing left to drink dew. All shall be sacrificed to my feast of rejoicing. When I was married you prepared such a festival. Now prepare a finer one!

THE MAYOR: When is the banquet to take place?

MARIAMNE: To-night. I'll give you till moon-rise. Go!

THE MAYOR and his attendants hurry out.

Mother, will you come to my feast?

ALEXANDRA: I will come—because I—guess something. And I'll wear my long-forgotten crown.

She goes hobbling out by a side door.

MARIAMNE: (to SOHEMUS) Greet Titus! Say that I expect him! And—you are my friend, Sohemus—do this for me! Selima would not come for me, but she would come for you. Ensure that she is with us and I will dance with you to-night, Sohemus—over a grave!

He bows an assent, then with a puzzled, lingering look, goes out. MARIAMNE leans against the pillar. The last sunlight falls on her.

MARIAMNE: Now, Herod, all is ready.

THE CURTAIN FALLS.

ACT II

SCENE II

The moon has risen, and the hall of the first Act is decorated for a feast. All curtains are drawn so that the back and at least one wall is divided from the terraces and gardens only by the tall pillars. There is a glimpse of tables with overturned goblets, plates, half-empty dishes; for the banquet is over and servants are pushing the relics of it out of the way to make more room for the dancers. Musicians playing their instruments wander through the throng. There is laughter, excitement, and a general air of holiday. The place blazes with candles, and even the distant gardens show innumerable points of light.

JUDAH and a CITIZEN detach themselves from the throng.

THE CITIZEN: Is it true that the King's coming back to-night?
I heard he was dead.

JUDAH: Would the Queen be giving a feast if Herod were dead?

THE CITIZEN: A good many families will lose their sons and brothers if he isn't. The prisons are packed since the rising.

JUDAH: That rising was an ill-advised business. It's only Herod who prevents the Romans from crushing us like corn in a mill.

THE CITIZEN: You're right. Always new laws and rulings. This censorship! What's it for? What's the good of counting heads?

JUDAH: What for? To increase the taxes. But Herod will talk to the Romans for us. At least he understands where the shoe pinches.

ALEXANDRA *appears in the distance.*
There's the Queen's mother—don't turn—look in the mirror.

He points out towards the audience. Both men peer.

THE CITIZEN: Not in mourning!
 JUDAH: For the first time since the death of Aristobulus.
 THE CITIZEN: That looks as if Herod had gone to join him.
 JUDAH: You talk too much.

As ALEXANDRA draws near SELIMA enters.

THE CITIZEN And there's the King's sister—not in mourning either. What does that mean?
 JUDAH: She's heard the rumour too; but she will not believe it; for she's been crying.

The two women meet.

THE CITIZEN: I wish I could hear what they say to each other.
 JUDAH: I daresay, but you don't come any nearer. My orders are to keep the crowd moving. We don't trust one of you.

ALEXANDRA and SELIMA draw nearer.

THE CITIZEN: (*protesting*) I'm a free citizen.
 JUDAH: (*grimly*) It's a fine phrase.

He hustles him towards the background.

SELIMA: The Queen has news, then, of Herod?
 ALEXANDRA: (*with measured courtesy*) My daughter does not give me her confidence, but I do not think she has had any news from Herod.

SELIMA: But she has heard——?

ALEXANDRA: I know nothing.

SELIMA: (*clutching at her*) Then what have *you* heard?

ALEXANDRA: Nothing.

SELIMA: What do you know, then?

ALEXANDRA: Nothing.

SELIMA: But you have put off your mourning.

ALEXANDRA: Yes, I have put off my mourning.

SELIMA: Why?

ALEXANDRA laughs and arranges her dress before the mirror.

SELIMA: (*guessing*) Herod? You have secret news of Herod? He is in prison?

Smiling, ALEXANDRA turns away. SELIMA runs after her.

So you think that the Romans have made an end of Herod? Your spies have reported it? But spies are not always to be trusted. Oh, believe me, your spies are easy to corrupt. I and my brother have laughed together—so often laughed together—over the tales we told you, the rumours we invented for you, the news we sent you—false news—by your own spies.

ALEXANDRA disregards her and stands looking towards the doorway where a stir begins and distant shouts of:

VOICES: The Queen! The Queen!

SELIMA: *(at her elbow)* So you've heard privately that Herod is dead? But who knows that Herod's own servant has not brought you the news by Herod's own command.

ALEXANDRA: *(contemptuously)* Oh, be silent!

SELIMA: *(in hysteria)* You are deceived, I tell you. You should have waited a little longer before putting off your mourning. When my brother comes——

ALEXANDRA smiles.

Ah, you smile—as your daughter smiles! Look at her!

MARIAMNE enters, magnificently dressed, with a fixed smile on her face, holding the attention of the entire crowd. There is a hushed murmur of admiration. ALEXANDRA moves towards MARIAMNE.

SELIMA: *(calling after her)* You put off your mourning, and she gives her feast, but you are both deceived. You'll not smile when my brother comes.

MARIAMNE and ALEXANDRA meet in the centre of the stage, ignoring the general murmur and SELIMA's insults.

ALEXANDRA: (to MARIAMNE) I applaud you. This feast is a public sign that, alive or dead, you have broken with Herod. You are once more my own daughter. Kiss me!

MARIAMNE *allows the kiss.*

Now welcome your guests!

MARIAMNE: (*raising her voice*) You are all very welcome.

ALEXANDRA: (*urgently*) Be theirs! Smile at them!

MARIAMNE: I am smiling.

ALEXANDRA: As your brother smiled in his coffin. Let your face light up! Let your voice be gay!

MARIAMNE: I'm not a candle to be lighted. I'm not a harp to be tuned. Take me as I am!

Her glance falls on SELIMA. Her expression changes.

But you're right. The sword must be sharpened, and only I can do it. So watch me, Mother, and enjoy the spectacle!

She turns to greet SOHEMUS as he enters.

Sohemus, shall we dance? Ah, Selima, you are very welcome.

SELIMA: You've had news? Herod returns?

MARIAMNE: The Romans say that he is dead.

SELIMA: Yet you give this feast?

MARIAMNE: (*hardily*) I live.

The two women stare at each other. SELIMA turns away with a shudder.

SELIMA: I can't believe you.

MARIAMNE: I can't make you.

SELIMA: Dead—and this blaze of candles!

MARIAMNE: To dance by!

SELIMA: Dead—and this blare of music!

MARIAMNE: To dance by!

She holds out her hand to him. SELIMA catches at her sleeve.

SELIMA: Mariamne, listen! I've always hated you—

MARIAMNE *smiles*.

—but always behind the hate gnawed a small thought—“Do I wrong her?” Sometimes I’ve come to you—sorry—ready to—

MARIAMNE: —kiss me. Once you did.

SELIMA: (*swelling into anger*) But now I see that you’re unnatural—

MARIAMNE: (*with smiling courtesy*) Forgive me! I am to dance for my guests. Watch me! Sohemus! (*then moving away*) When Herod gave you those—orders—he dreamed me as I am at this moment, wearing this dress, lit by these candles, dancing! His dream has come true.

She turns from one to another and ends with a sweet smile to SELIMA.

SELIMA: Watch me! And watch me! (*going*) Watch me! She’s possessed by devils!

ALEXANDRA, *accompanied by* TITUS, *draws near.*

ALEXANDRA: Titus, you will report to Rome how my daughter mourns her husband.

TITUS: I shall!

ALEXANDRA: She dances. She is Judith, sword in hand. She is Jael with the tent-peg. She is Queen Esther trapping a guest.

TITUS: (*half to himself, half to SELIMA*) The women of this people make my flesh creep.

A SERVANT approaches ALEXANDRA and draws her aside in talk, while another SERVANT passes with goblets and a pitcher of wine. TITUS waves him aside.

I drink no wine at her feast.

SELIMA: (*whispering*) But if she should be wrong, Titus—if Herod has escaped—

TITUS: If he didn’t help to give Antony his death-stroke there’s little chance for him.

SELIMA:

(*her eyes blazing*) But if he has!

In exaltation.

Jezebel painted her face and tired her head, but she was flung to the dogs in the end.

TITUS:

(*watching*) Her feet falter. Not so easy, is it, my queen, to dance down a grave? A dancer's cheeks should glow, but yours whiten—whiten—as if your thoughts were draining your heart's blood. Dance, Mariamne! Your feet follow the measure, but where are your thoughts? Now you shiver as you dance. Well, I daresay the widow Judith knew a pang or two as she unwound her arms from strong Holofernes, felt between his ribs for the mortal spot. Did she look at his sleeping face when she drove death home?

At this moment MARIAMNE suddenly sees her own reflection in the mirror and stops.

MARIAMNE:

Ha?

ALEXANDRA:

(*hurrying to her*) Daughter—three strangers with their retinues are asking for Herod. Will you admit them?

MARIAMNE:

(*disregarding her words*) Look, Mother—there in the mirror! That is how I saw myself once, in a dream. Not a jewel is missing, not even this great ruby.

She touches the ring on her hand.

Yes, you know that the ruby was lost on my wedding-day. This morning it was found. To-night for the first time I wear it. All chance! What is chance? But—

She touches the ruby again.

—this proves that the dream did not lie to me. All that I saw in it will follow.

ALEXANDRA:

Guests, daughter! Guests! Royal guests!

MARIAMNE:

Look, Mother—look in the mirror! At first, in my dream, it was misty as if it had been breathed

upon. The pictures ran into one another like reflections in running water. Then it began to clear. Then in the steel I saw my whole life pass. I moved through childhood. The light about me was young as morning. But the light hardened as I grew until, at high noon, I met Herod in a garden. We walked down the alleys and he matched white flowers against my hand. May God forget him as he forgets that hour, so utterly forgets that hour! Then the light darkened to blood-red, and against my will I looked into the future, seeing myself as I stand here, staring. Then the light grew ashy, Mother, and so did I. I was whiter than my marriage robes. My lips were bloodless—my eyes grew hollow. I knew that next I should see within myself my fleshless skeleton——!

Screaming.

I will not see it!

She reels.

ALEXANDRA: The Queen is ill. Your arm to her, Sohemus!

SOHEMUS goes quickly to support MARIAMNE.

MARIAMNE: *(wildly, as SOHEMUS approaches)* Do not touch me!

Outside there is a confusion of voices. It grows steadily louder.

ALEXANDRA: *(to SOHEMUS)* A fever must have its crisis! I foresaw it! Afterwards she will be quiet enough.

The confusion breaks into words.

VOICES: The King! The King!

ALEXANDRA: *(stunned)* Who?

MARIAMNE: *(wildly)* Death! Death himself! Unheralded, for that's his way!

HEROD appears in the dress of a Roman conqueror. Roman soldiers are in a press about him. He sees MARIAMNE and goes straight to her.

HEROD:

(*with a shout of triumph*) Mariamne! All's well!
All's well, Mariamne!

*He takes her in his arms and kisses her again
and again. She allows it, passive as an image.*

*Then, still holding her with one arm, he turns to
TITUS and the bystanders.*

(*eager in his pleasure*) How did you know I was
coming? I meant to astonish you all. Then I
saw this blaze of light streaming out a welcome!
Who brought the news?

*There is a dead silence. Then TITUS steps
forward.*

TITUS:

No one. Five minutes ago we still feared for
your life.

So you turned against Antony in time? That
was a master stroke. I applaud you.

MARIAMNE:

And I condole with you that you were not able
to kill Mark Antony with your own hand. That
would have proved to your new master how
little you valued your old one.

*Her smile is full of malice. HEROD releases
her.*

HEROD:

What end is this to a journey? I pitch headlong
into filth. Flies lift from it buzzing!

He looks from one to another.

Antony was dead before I could join with him.
Only when I knew that did I turn to Octavius.
I put off my crown, drew my sword and said:
"T'd have used this against you if I'd had the
chance. Well, now the chance is gone, so I fling
it at your feet. Here I stand, weaponless.
Death has released me from my oath to Antony.
Nothing else could have done. Consider then
the sort of friend I was, not whose friend! And
consider if that's not the sort of friend you need!"
He said: "Put on your crown!"

*There is a murmur, and HEROD's eye kindles.
The friendly silence is broken by a laugh from
MARIAMNE.*

MARIAMNE: (*shrilly*) Well, life is sweet—at any price! Let us dance!

HEROD turns to her.

You have had your triumph. Don't grudge me mine! I also have not joined Antony. I also am alive! Dance with me, Sohemus!

*There is a long pause. HEROD turns upon
SOHEMUS.*

HEROD: Sohemus? Did you betray me?

SOHEMUS returns the stare without answering.

HEROD looks from him to MARIAMNE.

(*to himself*) I might have known. I *did* know.

He groans, passes his hand across his eyes.

How did you change his nature? When you first touched his hand? Oh God, this rage of heart-break.

MARIAMNE: (*to SOHEMUS*) God is helpless. The wheel cannot turn back. (*to the SOLDIERS*) Take him away!

TITUS makes a signal. Some of his men surround SOHEMUS.

SOHEMUS: (*as they lead him away*) I deny nothing. But you can be sure, Herod——

*He looks HEROD full in the face as if saying
farewell.*

—you may be sure that I thought my King Herod was dead. (*harshly*) I still think so.

He laughs harshly.

Now do as you please!

He goes.

HEROD: Do as I please?

He turns upon TITUS.

I loved the man. I thought he loved me. You stand there, Titus, despising me because I show

my heart. But I am only a beast of the desert, Roman-tamed. You think that, Titus, behind the face of stone.

TITUS: *(uneasily)* Herod——!

HEROD: Well, what? I'll listen to you, stone man; for I dare not trust men of flesh and blood. What do you advise?

SELIMA: Wash and be clean!

HEROD, *brought up short, stares first at her, then down at his own hands.*

HEROD: It's true—blood has dried on me. Clean off the old blood with new, warm and flowing. If I cleanse my house and my heart, shall I have peace?

He pulls himself together.

Summon my councillors to try her! Let them acquit her if they can, condemn her if they must!

He turns to MARIAMNE, who looks at him in silence.

HEROD: Not a word? You still stake everything on silence? I know why. You think I shall remember the love that was between us. I do! I do! I'd rather tear out my own heart than tear you from me—as I must, I must!

MARIAMNE: *(abruptly)* I am a prisoner?

HEROD: Yes.

MARIAMNE: *(to the soldiers)* Then take me away! This death—

She points to HEROD.

—is not my husband.

The soldiers, at a signal from TITUS, form a little group about her. She begins to go out with them. HEROD watches her go and begins to laugh.

HEROD: Look at her! Who'd think that once I said to her: "We can't outlive each other, you and I.

If I fell in battle you'd know it, and die in the same hour of the one wound." I believed it too. Yes, my friends and watchers, I've believed mad things in my time. I dreamed that one could lay down life out of pure love, to save another's soul. But there's no such love in our humanity.

There is a stir and a sound of excited voices.

THE VOICES: Make way! Let them pass! Who are they?

As MARIAMNE goes out through one set of doors another is opened and a cavalcade appears headed by three crowned kings. The first, CASPAR, is an Indian, the second, MELCHIOR, has a Mongol's slant-eyes, the third, BALTHAZAR, is a handsome negro. Each is accompanied by a group of fellow-countrymen and slaves. CASPAR's slaves carry gold, MELCHIOR and BALTHAZAR themselves carry frankincense and myrrh. They enter amid exclamations of astonishment at their rich retinues and strange clothes.

The three KINGS solemnly salute HEROD.

CASPAR: Blessings on your house!

MELCHIOR: It is blessed already.

BALTHAZAR: Now, and for ever.

CASPAR: We beseech you to show us the Child.

MELCHIOR: We would see him with our own eyes before we die.

BALTHAZAR: And lay earth's treasures at His feet.

ALL THREE KINGS:

(in low, awed voices) And worship, worship.

HEROD: What child?

CASPAR: The Master of kings.

BALTHAZAR: The Prince of Peace.

MELCHIOR: The God of Love.

HEROD: Who told you of Him? Who guided you?

CASPAR: His star. My kingdom lies to the east.

MELCHIOR: Mine to the north.

BALTHAZAR: Mine to the south.
CASPAR: Seas and mountains divide us.
MELCHIOR: But we saw the star and we followed it. To-night for the first time we meet together.

Passionately.

Show us the royal Child.

HEROD: I know of none.

CASPAR: Has not the Queen, your wife, borne you a son this night?

HEROD: I have no wife.

CASPAR: *(to the others)* This is not the place.

MELCHIOR: Is there a second royal house in Jerusalem?

BALTHAZAR: There must be; for the star shines overhead.

JOAB: Some of David's line still live.

CASPAR: Was David a king?

JOAB: The greatest.

JUDAH'S FRIEND:

Royal Herod, while you were gone the Romans ordered each man to his own city to be taxed. I was in Bethlehem to-day and many have come in, poor folk, of David's line.

MELCHIOR: We will go to Bethlehem.

JUDAH'S FRIEND:

But only poor folk—shepherds—fishermen—a carpenter.

HEROD: *(to the KINGS)* You hear?

CASPAR: Nevertheless we will go to Bethlehem. For King or carpenter, the Child over Whose birth this star shines shall be exalted over the nations.

HEROD: Joab!

Then to the KINGS:

I will give you a guide to Bethlehem.

CASPAR courteously dissents. MELCHIOR also disagrees. BALTHAZAR points to the night sky.

BALTHAZAR: We have our guide.

HEROD: As you please. But when you have found the

Child bring me word again, that I may come
and worship Him with you.

CASPAR: We will.

They salute him, turn, and begin to go out.

HEROD: But they will not—they will not.

He crooks his finger at JOAB.

Follow them. Spy upon them!

THE CURTAIN FALLS.

ACT II

SCENE III

The scene is the same as the first scene of the play, but the great hall is now prepared as a place of trial. The Judges of the Court are assembled in a semi-circle with the CHIEF JUDGE in the centre. One seat is vacant. Court officials are also present. HEROD enters, leaning on TITUS. He wears his crown and royal robes. All rise as he enters. He acknowledges their greetings and takes his seat on his high throne.

HEROD: (to JUDAH) Is everything made ready?

JUDAH bows.

(keenly, as he notices the empty seat) Who's missing?

He indicates the vacant seat.

JUDAH: Lamech the Pharisee.

HEROD: Lamech. I ordered him to be held.

JUDAH: So he was till yesterday, then Sohemus freed him.

HEROD: Ha?

JUDAH: But the Queen heard of it and ordered him back to his prison.

HEROD: (incredulous) The Queen?

JUDAH: The Queen.

HEROD: Send for him. Justice shall be done. Not a member of the Court shall be missing. If she has made an enemy of her judge, what is that to—justice?

JUDAH signals to two soldiers, who go out.

HEROD turns to the CHIEF JUDGE.

You know why you were summoned?

THE CHIEF JUDGE:

We have heard—with deep sorrow.

HEROD: I believe it. We have served Jerusalem, I and

my house. All that touches me touches you. You will rejoice only less than I myself if the Queen——

His voice breaks.

If you can send her back to me cleared you will rejoice as I shall. Nevertheless you'll do your duty whatever comes of it, remembering that my honour is your honour, my shame your shame. Summon the witnesses!

A side door is flung open.

JUDAH: *(acting as herald)* Selima, daughter of Antipater the Idumæan, sister of Herod the King, come into the Court!

SELIMA *enters and makes obeisance to the KING.*

THE CHIEF JUDGE:

Do you witness for the accused or against her?

SELIMA: *(fiercely)* Against her.

THE CHIEF JUDGE:

(indicating a seat) Sit there!

JUDAH: Alexandra, daughter of Hyrcanus the High Priest, wife of the Prince Alexander, mother of Aristobulus the High Priest, mother of the Queen, come into the Court!

ALEXANDRA *enters and abases herself before HEROD.*

ALEXANDRA: Herod, master and King!

THE CHIEF JUDGE:

Do you witness for the accused or against her?

ALEXANDRA: I sever my fate from that of the Queen. I save myself for the future.

THE CHIEF JUDGE:

For her or against her?

ALEXANDRA: Against her.

There is a faint murmur of disappointment.

THE CHIEF JUDGE *indicates her seat beside SELIMA, and she goes to it.*

THE CHIEF JUDGE:

(to TITUS) Commander of the Roman forces—
TITUS *rises.*

—do you witness for the accused or against her?

TITUS, *without a word, stalks over to the bench and seats himself by SELIMA and ALEXANDRA.*

HEROD: Enough!

JUDAH: There are many more names.

HEROD: Are not three as good as three thousand? Must you summon the wicks of the candles and the dead garlands, and the drunken flies upon the wall? Shall the trial last for ever? Since the end must come, let it come quickly!

THE CHIEF JUDGE *listens, bows deeply, and turns to JUDAH.*

THE CHIEF JUDGE:

Where are the witnesses for the defence?

HEROD: There are none.

THE CHIEF JUDGE:

It is true that she called none. But here on my roll of charges someone has inscribed two names—I do not know the hand.

ALEXANDRA: Even a queen has friends.

She laughs.

HEROD: Read the names!

THE CHIEF JUDGE:

Sohemus, governor of Galilee. Joseph the Viceroy.

HEROD: (*on the edge of an explosion*) Who has done this?

He controls himself.

These witnesses cannot be called.

THE CHIEF JUDGE:

Sohemus should be called.

TITUS: (*rising*) He was executed this morning.

There is a general stir.

THE CHIEF JUDGE:

On what grounds?

TITUS: Disobeying orders in time of war.

THE CHIEF JUDGE *stares a moment, then makes a movement of acquiescence.*

THE CHIEF JUDGE:

It is time to summon the Queen.

JUDAH: Mariamne, daughter of Alexandra——

He breaks off at the sound of a scuffle, and LAMECH is dragged in by SOLDIERS. He is in chains.

TITUS: What's this? Easy now!

ONE OF THE SOLDIERS:

He wouldn't come. We had to drag him. He fought like a madman.

They drag him into the centre of the stage. There he straightens himself and stands staring about him.

THE CHIEF JUDGE:

Lamech, as one of the Council, the King has summoned you to sit in judgement.

LAMECH: I will not judge. I will not speak.

THE CHIEF JUDGE:

The compulsion is upon us all, Lamech.

LAMECH: Yes, there is compulsion upon me. I am even as the prophet into whom the Spirit entered and spoke, saying: "Behold they shall put bands upon thee and shall bind thee with them: but thou shalt not go out among them."

HEROD: (*furiously*) He is a member of this Court and he shall do his office. He could do it twelve years ago when he and all of you summoned me before you—the young Herod, easily put down. He was glad to be your mouthpiece then! Let him be your mouthpiece now!

LAMECH: And the Spirit said: "I will make thy tongue cleave to the roof of thy mouth and thou shalt be dumb. Thou shalt not be to them a reprover, for they are a rebellious house. But when I speak with thee I will open thy mouth. And thou shalt say unto them——"

HEROD: Take him to his place.

LAMECH: Thus saith the Lord God: "He that heareth, let him hear. And he that forebeareth, let him forebear! For they are a rebellious house——"

HEROD: Put him in his seat!

Then as LAMECH still struggles.

Bind him to it!

The soldiers bind LAMECH to the chair.

Summon the Queen.

JUDAH: (*in the doorway*) Mariamne, daughter of Alexandra the Maccabee, wife of King Herod, mother of the Princes Alexander, Aristobulus and Philip, come into the Court.

There is a long pause, a stir, a murmur in the corridor beyond, then MARIAMNE enters. She comes to the centre of the stage, makes a deep obeisance to HEROD, then waits.

THE CHIEF JUDGE:

Dear Queen, a heavy duty is laid upon us. You stand before your judges.

MARIAMNE: Before my judges, yes. Also—

She makes them a grave obeisance.

—before you.

THE CHIEF JUDGE:

(*with relief in his voice*) You refuse to recognise this Court?

MARIAMNE: I stand before a higher one. Question me if you must, but come near, speak loudly; for I can hardly see or hear you. My judges are the dead of my own race. All night long I lay, and

saw my great ones pass. Now it is daylight and they are still about me. They stand behind your chairs, their eyes fixed upon me, they beckon me with their shrouded hands. And so you living seem mere ghosts, and passion there upon his throne a phantom king; for behind him towers Judas Maccabee. Look, Mother! There he stands, the father of our race. Mother, he shall be proud of me.

ALEXANDRA: (*rising and beginning to go to her*) Mariamne, curb yourself! What do you gain by this defiance? Listen, Mariamne!

She comes close to her.

Be advised by your own mother?

MARIAMNE: Farewell !

There is a pause as the two women look at each other.

Farewell!

She turns to the CHIEF JUDGE.

Read the accusation!

THE CHIEF JUDGE:

You are charged with deceiving the King, your husband.

MARIAMNE: (*quickly*) I deny it! Did he not find me as he expected to find me? Did I put on mourning when the news of his death came? Did I shed tears, tear my hair, strew ashes on my head? There would have been deceit. But I—I danced for joy. Did I not, Selima?

SELIMA rises. *But before she can speak* HEROD *interposes.*

HEROD: (*to SELIMA*) No need to speak. I found her as she says! If I had not seen it with my own eyes no witnesses could have made me believe it.

MARIAMNE: Not believe it? You expected it. Why else did you put an executioner to guard me?

HEROD *bursts into a fit of laughter.*

HEROD: You hear her? She has not deceived me, because she only did that which my every instinct warned me she would do.

MARIAMNE: Not instinct—fear! You had killed my brother; how could you trust his sister? You sinned against me and so you believed that I must sin against you more deeply to—make things equal. Isn't it true? Or have you always, in all the years of our love, arranged for my death whenever you left my side? Answer me! You cannot. Only since Aristobulus was murdered did your trust in me slacken. From that hour you knew, or thought you knew, that you had lost me. Well, I'll let your knowledge teach me my duty. Now and for ever I divorce myself from you.

HEROD: (*to the JUDGE*) Does she confess? Demand an answer? Does she confess?

THE CHIEF JUDGE:

Do you confess your guilt?

MARIAMNE *does not speak.*

HEROD: (*to the JUDGE*) Continue the charges!

THE CHIEF JUDGE:

It is charged that, with the surrender of your body and by promise of marriage, you seduced from their duty to the King, the Viceroy Joseph and Sohemus Governor of Galilee.

MARIAMNE: Confront me with them!

HEROD: Let her summon them herself! She has an easy way with the—escaped! You heard her say that they come when she beckons.

MARIAMNE: I demand that Sohemus be brought into Court.

There is silence. MARIAMNE looks from one to the other and realises the truth.

I understand.

To HEROD.

So you were afraid to leave him alive for even half a day.

To the Court.

Who stood by him in death?

TITUS *rises.*

Did he speak with you freely?

TITUS: I was his friend.

MARIAMNE: (*to HEROD*) Then let him witness for the dead!
I will not ask one question. Let *him* bear witness.

THE CHIEF JUDGE:

The Queen is within her rights.

HEROD: (*to TITUS*) Speak!

TITUS: I met Sohemus on his way to death and walked with him the last yards. He spoke a little. He said: "I am put to death because I betrayed a secret. If not I'd have been put to death because I could have betrayed it." And then he——

THE CHIEF JUDGE:

Did he speak of anyone?

TITUS: Of her—of him.

HEROD: What did he say?

TITUS: Oh, it was one wild outpouring of his feeling for the Queen——

HEROD: (*to the JUDGES*) Mark that!

TITUS: You didn't know her—you were too blind.

HEROD: That's how any thief speaks—"He didn't value his jewel so I took it away from him." Did he attempt to defend his betrayal of my orders?

TITUS: He said he did it out of horror and disgust.

HEROD: No word of love?

TITUS *hesitates.*

Titus, on your Roman honour, was there no word of love?

TITUS: (*reluctantly*) He owned that he loved her. He said she never knew it.

HEROD: (*to MARIAMNE*) Did you know it?

MARIAMNE: I knew it.

HEROD: (*to the JUDGES*) You hear her? And you hear him? Weigh these words!

TITUS *moves back to his place.*

(*to the CHIEF JUDGE*) One question more. Ask her, did she love him?

THE CHIEF JUDGE:

(*formally to MARIAMNE*) The King asks——

Suddenly MARIAMNE puts up her hand in a quick fierce gesture, as if ordering him to cease speaking. There is a silence.

THE CHIEF JUDGE:

Do you confess?

MARIAMNE *is silent.*

HEROD: If she confesses she shall have mercy.

THE CHIEF JUDGE:

Do you confess?

MARIAMNE *remains silent. There is a pause.*

HEROD: She won't confess—but neither will she deny. That's her pride—never to lie. Sin is nothing. Well—your answer? Is she not guilty.

The JUDGES look at each other, troubled.

Does it trouble you that I can bring no proofs? But how can I? Who saw them together? Only the chamber walls: only the stars. Who could speak against them? Only the rustling curtains: a door closing softly. How can I call these witnesses? But she is very beautiful. I call her beauty to witness against her. Before now you have condemned a man for murder when you've found the stolen goods in his house. He could wring his red hands and swear that the dead man

had given him the treasure, but none the less you delivered him to the tormentors.

He rises, comes down the steps of his throne, and stands confronting the JUDGES and MARIAMNE.

The case here is the same.

He looks from one to the other.

Yes, she is very beautiful and a woman, and the last of her ancient race, and you would save her if you could. But against your longings put my instinct, my own conviction, the bitter knowledge of her hidden in my heart. Her death! I demand her death. You dare not deny me.

TITUS: *(rising)* This is no fair trial. I will not stay here.

On this ALEXANDRA also rises. TITUS begins to make his way out, ALEXANDRA following.

MARIAMNE: *(softly)* Titus!

TITUS turns to her.

I recognise this Court. If I make no protest, need you?

For a moment the two look at each other, then TITUS salutes as if she were a fellow soldier, turns, and sits down near the throne. MARIAMNE then turns to ALEXANDRA who is about to speak.

(overruling her) My happiness never meant much to you. If you would have me forget and forgive, be silent now!

ALEXANDRA looks at her, a spasm crosses her face, she puts her hand to her mouth to control it, turns and goes back to her place.

MARIAMNE: And now, my judges?

THE CHIEF JUDGE:

(uneasily to HEROD) We need time. The case is not clear.

HEROD: I will not give you time.

In a torrent.

I will no longer endure this hideous uncertainty. I will not waste my days and nights over riddles I cannot solve. I will not for ever be asking myself if this defiance is the mask of a hateful innocence, or the most cunning mask of sin. I'll break through this strangle-net of hate and love before I'm suffocated. I'll save myself, cost what it will. And so let her die! You hesitate. Not yet convinced? What? Have I not made it plain? The case *is* clear. Look at her! A woman who can defy men as she does deserves to die. And if she were clean as a lily, still she deserves to die.

Still they sit silent.

(*raging*) Silence? Open rebellion? Who else defies me?

He goes from one to another.

Do you? You? You?

Each JUDGE in turn shrinks and drops his eyes.

Then end it! End it. I say!

THE CHIEF JUDGE:

(*to the others*) Any man who dissents from the King's sentence shall rise in his place.

Everyone remains seated except LAMECH, who struggles for a moment in his bonds, then resigns himself.

Then——

He rises.

Queen Mariamne, you are condemned to death. Have you anything to say?

MARIAMNE:

If the executioner was not ordered long before the trial began——

HEROD:

(*hoarsely*) I gave no such order.

MARIAMNE: Then, before I go, I would beg for a private word with Titus.

She turns to HEROD.

Grant me my wish and in return I will wish you a long life—(*strangely*)—a long, long life.

HEROD: I give you your wish.

He turns to TITUS.

She is inhuman.

TITUS: She looks at you as no woman should look at a man. And so end the business quickly.

SELIMA: Quickly!

HEROD: (*to ALEXANDRA*) And you? Have you nothing to say?

ALEXANDRA: Nothing.

HEROD turns and takes a step towards MARIAMNE. They look long at each other. MARIAMNE closes her lips.

HEROD: (*at last*) Die!

To JUDAH.

See to it!

He goes out, followed by SELIMA. JUDAH beckoning the soldiers, goes out quickly by another door.

ALEXANDRA turns to MARIAMNE.

ALEXANDRA: This is your own choice.

MARIAMNE assents. ALEXANDRA goes out past the JUDGES, who are now huddling in the doorway.

THE CHIEF JUDGE:

(*agitated*) It can't be! The last of the Maccabees!

ANOTHER JUDGE:

It was useless to withstand him. Yet later he'll punish us for not withstanding him. You know how his mood changes.

ANOTHER JUDGE:

Let us go to him now!

ANOTHER JUDGE:

Ask for imprisonment—not death!

THE CHIEF JUDGE:

That's it—imprisonment!

They hurry out, following HEROD. But one of the JUDGES pauses by LAMECH as he goes out, stoops, and loosens his bonds, looking fearfully round to see that he is not observed.

THE JUDGE: Get away while you can!

He hurries out. But LAMECH hardly moves. He sits rubbing his wrists, watching and listening. Meanwhile MARIAMNE has turned to TITUS.

MARIAMNE: Are you puzzled because I talk to you instead of my mother? But she and I, you know, go our separate ways.

TITUS: Queen Mariamne, I hate what you are and what you've done, but I like your hero's way of marching out of life as if this gorgeous world weren't worth a glance. That's Roman courage.

MARIAMNE: Not courage.

TITUS: Not? Are you one of those who dream of another life?

MARIAMNE: I have no dreams. I know what I lose.

TITUS: Then I'll say this: you stand there braver than our own Cæsar. For when Brutus struck him he hid his face in his mantle lest he should show his pain. But *you* don't hide *your* face.

MARIAMNE: I hide—myself. And yet—I'm so weak that I long for one living creature to remember me—as I truly am. Titus, if I show myself to you will you give me your word to be silent till I'm gone, and will you—be with me at the last, and—hold my hand?

TITUS: (*hoarsely*) Why have you chosen *me*?

MARIAMNE: Because you know us all, and watch our hell; but

you're not in it. My people will believe you if you witness for me. Will you?

TITUS: I will. I give you my word.

There is a moment's pause. It is with an effort that MARIAMNE at last begins:

MARIAMNE: I never sinned against Herod. What, against Herod?

She laughs.

This is the truth. Herod was my god. "Thou shalt have no other gods before me!" But Herod was my god. That was my sin. For that I am punished. Another truth—I knew that Herod was alive. My foster-sister who lives beyond the hills was to release a homing-bird when he passed. But as that small messenger fluttered into my hands I learnt that again (the first time I forgave him) he had put me under the sword. Then I saw what I had to do. You came to the feast I gave. (*abruptly*) An empty shell welcomed you——

TITUS: Ha?

MARIAMNE: (*wildly*) —danced—and danced! To-day they sentenced this shell. It will be dragged to the block and forced to kneel. But the blow will fall on me.

TITUS stands as if stunned.

(*timidly*) You may believe me.

TITUS: I must believe you. And—I don't blame you. But I own to you that you deceived even me. You filled me yesterday with as much loathing as now with——

He breaks off, staring at her.

Yes, this is Roman honour. But dear Queen, if you deceived even me, how could you expect Herod to see clearly blinded as he is by his own passion? Can you not pity? I pity him. I find your justice inhuman.

- MARIAMNE: So is his jealousy.
- TITUS: But not his pain. Release me from my promise!
- MARIAMNE: It could change nothing. I have spilt my life like water out of a cup. It has sparked in the sun. Now it sinks into the earth.
- TITUS: If I went to Herod—now—and told him——
- MARIAMNE: (*bitterly*) Oh, then I'd be loved again! Who doubts it? And the next time he went to the wars who would be my third executioner? No, Titus, no! If there were ways out do you not think I'd have found one when I bade my sons good-bye?
- TITUS: If he divined the truth and came to you——?
- MARIAMNE: Oh, into my arms—— Titus! Titus! I'm not haggling for my life. But I will not buy it at a shameful price. But *if* he came—why, then he'd have conquered the devil that drives him. Then my whole spirit would be his—all his. Oh, then I'd make his life a daily, hourly bliss.
- TITUS: Oh Herod, feel! Guess! Does nothing warn you?
- MARIAMNE: Here comes his answer.

She turns to JUDAH.

Are they waiting for me?

JUDAH *bows*. MARIAMNE *looks for one long moment at the empty throne, then goes quietly out*. TITUS *follows*. On the stage only LAMECH *crouched in his chair, is left alone*.

- LAMECH: "Then I went down to the potter's house, and behold he wrought a work on the wheels. And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hands of the potter; so he made it again another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to make it."

JOAB *bursts in*.

JOAB: (to the servants) Where is the King? I must instantly see the King!

A SERVANT goes to the door through which

HEROD has gone out.

LAMECH: (rising in his chair and whispering) What is it? You are changed. Where have you been? What have you seen?

JOAB: I have seen the glory of the Lord. I have seen Peace on earth and Goodwill towards men!

LAMECH: (coming across to him) It has been vouchsafed to you and not to me? Why not to me? Why not to me? Look in my eyes and tell me—what have you seen?

JOAB: (whispering) Messiah!

The door re-opens and HEROD enters, followed by SELIMA. HEROD is ravaged.

HEROD: What is it? Who breaks in on me now? Selima! Go to them—no wait! Tell me again, Selima! Tell me again what Joseph said and how she looked at him. Tell me again——!

JOAB: I come from Bethlehem.

HEROD: (dazed) Bethlehem! Bethlehem!

Suddenly he jerks himself to attention.

JOAB: The kings? You followed them? That goose-chase! I saw the Child. He lay in a manger. The kings knelt in the dung and worshipped. The stable-beasts were quiet. Their breath steamed in the air. I heard singing. And I—— wept for joy because I saw the glory——

HEROD: (not hearing) Mariamne!

JOAB: The whole village gathered round the stable, kneeling as they do when you pass——

HEROD: Mariamne! Mariamne!

LAMECH: He shall overthrow the thrones of the earth. He shall wake the dead. He shall draw down the stars of heaven and reign through all eternity.

HEROD: Mariamne!

JUDAH and TITUS return. ALEXANDRA follows. HEROD lifts his head from his hands in mute question.

JUDAH: It is finished.

TITUS: (*slowly*) Yes, she is dead, at the executioner's hands. Nevertheless his office is a kindlier one than mine. I have to tell you——

HEROD: Leave me!

TITUS: (*raising his voice*) I have to tell you that she was innocent.

HEROD: No!

With a half scream.

No, Titus, no!

Again his voice changes.

If it were so and you have let her die——

TITUS: None could have prevented it—except yourself.

HEROD: I see that even in death she cast irresistible spells.

TITUS: (*sternly*) Spells? The woman showed me her heart. She wanted to die. She chose that you should kill her, and so she mocked you with a phantom of herself. You struck at that and struck herself indeed.

HEROD: She told you that—yes, to avenge herself.

TITUS: She told the truth.

HEROD: (*shouting him down*) Sohemus owned that he loved her.

TITUS: Who did not? Was that her fault? Or Joseph's fault?

HEROD: Joseph again! Does every grave open?

ALEXANDRA: Have no fear. One remains sealed.

HEROD: Why did Joseph betray me?

SELIMA: For love of her, for love of her!

ALEXANDRA: An hour before he told her the truth she had sworn to me that she would not outlive you.

HEROD: You knew that—and tell me now?

ALEXANDRA: Yes—now.

TITUS: It was her last word to me. But I'd never have told you. I wanted to clear her name, not torture you.

HEROD: Then——

TITUS: (*going to him and supporting him as he reels*) Bear it. We are all guilty.

HEROD: Yes! You—she—every one of us who condemned her. But I alone have lost my soul, my soul.

ALEXANDRA: Sleep in peace, my little son, the account is balanced.

HEROD: You triumph. You think I'm broken. I'm not broken. I'm still king. Let any try to rise against me.

He turns on LAMECH.

Call out your followers! Try that game again!

He turns upon SELIMA.

Why do you shrink from me? I've killed your husband. Now my wife is dead. You must sit here by me.

But SELIMA shrinks away, terrified. He forgets her as, after a long pause, he lifts his crown from his head and sits looking at it.

This is my crown. This is my treasure. This is all I have. If this my crown were set with all the stars of all the heavens I'd give each living diamond, give all for Mariamne. If I held the circle of eternity between my knees, and not this petty ring, I'd give eternity for Mariamne. And if by lying down for ever in the grave I dread—if by ceasing now, upon this instant I could bring her back to life, for ever young, for ever beautiful: myself should dig my grave.

His voice changes.

I cannot do it. I can do nothing.

The crown slips from his hands and rolls down the steps.

There goes my crown.

He watches it.

That trifle is still mine. Some of you pick it up and bring it to me! Quick! Give it here! Who takes my crown?

They give it to him.

There, safe again!

His eyes fall on JOAB.

What were you babbling as I came in? Is a hand stretched out for it already? The hand of a child? A King? A son of David? Messiah of the prophecies? And his way is lighted by a star! And his way is to be made smooth by crushing me! Nothing shall crush me! Joab! You will go to Bethlehem and there give orders that this child—— But no. You'll not find Him. Not all men see the star, and these three kings have not returned. They knew me.

He laughs.

Ha! King's wits against King's wisdom. They knew me. So you will go to Bethlehem and see to it that every child born there within the last year is slaughtered. Not one is to be left alive. To-morrow I'll receive your report. Afterwards——

His voice changes.

—Mariamne!

He sways where he stands. TITUS rushes to him.

Titus!

He collapses in TITUS's arms.

LAMECH:

But Moses lived in spite of Pharaoh!

THE CURTAIN FALLS

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and Mariamne

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